

Renewal Sunday Sermon
September 9, 2007
Deut. 30:15-20, Luke 14:25-33
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Every year on Renewal Sunday we celebrate. We've come back together after the summer to this big, wonderful combined service. The choirs and the acolytes are back; the green balloons decorate the church, the barbecue and moon bounce await. It's a fun Sunday, and we have much to celebrate.

More than any recent year, this really is not just a day of renewal, but part of a whole year. This fall, the cross which stood in splendor against that back wall, will be lifted high above a new altar. Organ music will return, its beauty renewed and enhanced. And a beautiful new altar, the center of our worship life, will be placed just there, inviting all who come to gather around it and share in the bread and wine that draw us close to God and to one another.

The renewal of our worship space is a very immediate, concrete reality. You will see it happening before your eyes. But we may also wonder, and certainly sometimes I wonder, if renewal doesn't mean more than all of this, doesn't reach deeper to our roots as a congregation. Are we changing as a community, being renewed as a community, or are we just renovating the living room?

Beyond the outward and visible signs – and there are plenty of others as well as the Lift High the Cross project, how is renewal happening here in this parish; how are our lives being touched and transformed by what we do here?

I think this morning's scriptures raise some hard questions connected with renewal, and I do think we should consider them. Much as I'd like to sort of brush it aside, what are we to make of Luke's version of Jesus' teaching about discipleship in today's gospel? Hate mother and father? Hate children, even life itself? Give up all possessions? I can't accept this as the cost of discipleship. I think and hope Jesus was talking about priorities, about putting God first, but as we have it, I have to reject this teaching as anything we can be expected to follow literally. Instead, I recommend you ignore it, just as we allow ourselves to ignore other passages of scripture which simply make no sense in terms of the great commandment to love our neighbors, or those passages which represent God as a cruel and exacting judge. Why this passage is part of our cycle of gospel readings to be read in church is beyond me. It's not that I'm opposed to hard teachings – I'm just stymied when it comes to figuring out what Jesus means here, if he actually ever said these things.

The reading from Deuteronomy is far more helpful – Moses' words to his beloved community not long before his death. It is a covenant renewal speech,

reminding Israel of their relationship with God and that the choice of living fully into that relationship with all its promises is theirs.

Moses urges his people to “choose life” – life and prosperity over death and adversity – blessings and curses all laid out – choose life! It is this passage that can really speak to us here and now in our own context and in our own day. I checked this out yesterday with my Jewish neighbor across the street, Norman. He wanted to know what I was preaching about, and I said that I was drawing on the riches of his tradition, the Hebrew Bible, going back to the ancient words of Moses about choosing life. Norman, promptly retorted, “if you want to choose life, get rid of your newspaper subscription!” But that’s another sermon...

How do we choose life as a faith community? It’s another way of asking what renewal entails. We face enormous promise for the future in this parish – even at a time when some churches are dwindling and dying; some are torn up over division in the wider church; some are simply broke. We have so many blessings, so much prosperity, but there are potential curses out there too, and choices to be made. How can we choose life in the way that Moses urged so long ago? Back then, the answer was to obey all the commandments and reject other gods. We don’t have an elaborate set of rules all laid out governing every aspect of our common life the way ancient Israel did. We know that a yardstick of strict obedience can never save us, that doing things right or even doing the right thing won’t guarantee that life will always work out well. We struggle to discern God’s will in the complexities of our lives, and, as best we can, it is good that we treasure our blessings and avoid some things that can prove to be curses.

Here are three things that we might see as curses – things that could stifle the abundant life of this community:

One is an attitude of scarcity and poverty, as in “we don’t have the money”, when what we mean is we don’t choose to spend the money. The one really good part of the gospel today is the part about counting the cost of building or going to war. Prudence indeed makes sense, and its exercise can be a blessing, but stinginess is a curse.

A second potential curse is all around us in our culture. It is a mean-spiritedness that plagues basic civic virtue. It is the desire to always be right, to win, to get mine, to get even, to put down the other because he is different or because we don’t agree. Competition and drive and hard hearts fuel some kinds of success, but they can be curses for a community that is trying to be Christian, trying to be different from the way the world is, trying to be rooted and grounded in love.

A third possible curse is aversion to risk and the fear that drives it. We can't be fully open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst if we aren't willing to try new ways, embrace new people and leaders and try to discern something we might call God's will vs. our own well-being. Seeking the kingdom of God here and now calls for this kind of openness to transformation.

These potential curses are just that – potential. They can only plague us if we let them, but they do threaten because they are the ways of the world in which we live, and the ways of our humanity – we must struggle not to choose them.

In order to truly choose the abundant life that God offers (church language calls this the Kingdom of God), we might choose life in the following three ways:

God's generosity blesses us – with the creation, with life and love, hearts and minds and talents for living well and fully. Can we choose generosity and open-handedness with our church and a needy world? We are doing so well with the Capital Campaign; as the 2008 stewardship campaign gears up, can we choose abundant life here by being willing to pay the costs of being the church we aspire to be?

At our best, thank God, we are not at all mean-spirited! We reach out; we listen and comfort and care for each other. We forgive, we try again. We welcome newcomers warmly; we encourage people to get involved; we accept each other's flaws. There are very deep roots of love and mutual concern in this parish – with them we are richly blessed.

Third and finally, by stepping out with the Lift High the Cross project, we have taken a risk and opted for change. We don't know for sure how it will all play out, but we've begun the journey. This time of change requires flexibility, and we're showing it – so far, so good! Where will it all take us? How much will our worship change – become more communal and less individual? How much will our theology move beyond the theism which keeps so many folks, especially young adults, my own children and many of yours included, away from church? Is there a possibility that a deepening process of learning and spiritual formation will take on more value here? There is more to church membership than committee work – how can we find the time and desire? Choose life!

These possible curses and blessings face us as individuals of course. But for today, we are here to renew this beloved community – to face together the ways we are called to be church and to choose what is life-giving. I have no doubt that we will. I know there will be let-downs along the way, but I commend to us all the renewal of our faith and of our life together. Choose life - it's way, way more than renovating the living room. Amen.