

CHOOSING OUR PAIN

Sermon, February 12, 2017
Text: Deuteronomy 30:11-20

A few of you may remember it was just about nine years ago, April 16, 2008, that my father survived a massive heart attack; the affliction came as a complete and total shock to all of us, as he had always enjoyed excellent health. In fact, at the time he was getting ready to go to church softball practice, which he still did at age 75. I immediately drove to Pennsylvania the next day and joined my family in the hospital waiting room throughout his subsequent triple bypass surgery, which he came through very well (*and gave him to us for eight more active and life-filled years; most of you know Dad passed away a year ago January 2*).

I remember him telling me weeks after the surgery about one vivid memory he had from that post-operation first night ... the endotracheal tube was still in his throat, but as he was in otherwise excellent health his body was quickly recovering from the trauma and anesthetic of surgery. He was rather alert and quite conscious of being surrounded by agitated nurses and his surgeon saying to him, "*Alan, you need to stop doing that. Alan, don't do that.*" However, no one told him WHAT to "stop doing." They simply repeated some variation of, "*You have to stop doing that!*" He said it was the one of the most frustrating experiences he's ever had ... adding to the discomfort of being increasingly awake and feeling more and more immobilized with all those tubes and restraints was having all these concerned voices saying, basically, "Alan, STOP THAT!" and he didn't know what in the world it was they wanted him to stop!

He was later to learn that what he was doing, unwittingly, was reflexively biting down on the endotracheal tube and cutting off his oxygen, which was putting undue additional strain upon his heart. Apparently, they thought he was doing it intentionally, but he really didn't know! In fact, I'm sure the frustration only added to the dilemma, because we Clarks have a tendency to clench our teeth all the more when exasperated! He told me that at one point he tried to "write" out on his thigh using his index finger the letters, "W-H-A-T-?", but none of the medical staff realized he was trying to communicate. They just thought these were random movements of a semi-conscious man. If my father could have talked, he would have bellowed, "TELL ME WHAT I AM SUPPOSED TO STOP! WHAT AM I DOING WRONG?!"

It may be a bit of a stretch, but thirty-plus years of ministry experience has taught me there are some who perceive God as sitting aloof on His throne, watching us in the struggles and thrashings about of our daily lives and simply bellowing to us from on high, "STOP THAT!" Fortunately, God is a bit more clear to us than my father's surgeon and nurses were to him. The truth is God does do so much more than simply say, "*Stop, stop, stop; no, no, no!*" As Micah told us two weeks ago (Micah 6:8), "*He has shown you, O man, what is good.*" Paraphrased in so many words "*Oh, man! God's already told you what He wants! Don't keep asking God what you are supposed to do! Don't keep avoiding your calling, don't keep putting off your responsibilities, don't keep making excuses for things you've done or left undone, don't keep putting off doing what you know to be right and good by claiming you don't know what the will of God is for your life!*" As I mentioned then, I think if we are honest with ourselves, in our heart of hearts, we really know what it is God wants us to do and what it is God wants us not to do ... for the most part, we know what it is we must do to make things right, we know what it is we must do to live lives of integrity, honor and goodness, we know He wants us to be truthful and honest and trustworthy ... "*What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*"

Moses picks up where we left off with Micah, saying in so many words. "*What I am commanding you today is not too difficult or beyond your reach. It's not hard to understand! It's not beyond your reach! You don't have to climb up to heaven or cross an ocean to go get it ... the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may readily obey it. Love the Lord your God, walk in His ways, keep His commands and laws, then you will live and increase and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering. I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. And he goes on to conclude, "Your choice! I encourage you to choose life, so you and your children may live."*

For better or worse, God allows us to make our own choices, our own decisions ... and actually, it really is for better. When He created us in His image, *the ability to choose* was part of that. The ability to choose is part and parcel of what it means to be made in the image of God, part and parcel of what it means of what it means to be a human being. When God created us, He chose NOT to make us mechanisms wholly obedient to His control, like so many characters in a video game controlled by His divine joy stick. Nor did He choose to make us just one more animal controlled and driven solely by passion and appetite. No, He endowed us with the awesome gift ... and the great burden ... of being free

and responsible. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed to live a full and fulfilling life, which *included* the opportunity and dignity to make a very real choice ... that was what that forbidden tree symbolized. Real choice. Adam and Eve were given the choice to heed God's instructions and live forever in paradise, to choose life; or, they could choose to eat of the forbidden tree and go on to die. And we know the story. As the Grail guardian knight told *Indiana Jones*, they chose ... poorly. And we have suffered ever since.

The book of Deuteronomy was basically Moses' farewell address to the people he cared about and loved, people he had been on the desert road with for some forty years. They were now about to leave the wilderness and pass on into the Promised Land, but Moses would not be going with them. These are his final words to them ... words he no doubt chose quite carefully. "*This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.*" Deuteronomy is the fifth of the Books of Moses, the five books known as the Pentateuch or the Torah (*in fact, in German Bibles Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are called First Moses, Second Moses, Third Moses and so on.*) I find it interesting the five Books basically begin with a crucial choice ... the choice in the Garden ... and end with a crucial choice ... the choice offered here by Moses. As if to say, "*Life or death. Just like in Eden. You pick.*" In short, make the right choices and you and your children will live and prosper. Make the wrong choices, and destruction, difficulty, death will result.

One of the marks of maturity is realizing the choices we make have consequences. If we choose well, we often reap rewards. If we choose poorly, we often pay a price. We do reap what we sow. As one person put it: There are two major pains in life, (a) *the pain of discipline*, and (b) *the pain of regret*. Often the pain of the latter comes from not suffering the good pain of the former. It's interesting that the word "disciple" comes from the word "discipline." If we choose the pain of discipline as disciples of Jesus Christ, we reap huge benefits. If we don't, then we often reap the pain of hellish regret. Choose your pain.

In a very real sense, in many ways we choose our pain (*of course, there are painful things that can and do happen to us that are beyond our capacity to choose; I'm not really talking about those calamities*). The law of sowing and reaping has not been repealed. We try to sow a good life ... a life of integrity, a life of kindness, a life of doing good things, of life of treating people with kindness and respect, a life of paying attention to our relationships with God and our neighbor and our loved ones, a life of taking care of our bodies, a life of nourishing our minds and our souls ... and ninety-nine times out of one hundred, we will reap good benefits; good benefits like lasting friendships, better than average health, contentment, accomplishment, serenity. However, take the shortcuts, or be a cheater, or a slacker, or be dishonest, or stifle the voice of conscience, or ignore the promptings of God's spirit, or be a scoundrel ... and eventually life will exact a toll. As the saying goes, time heals all wounds, and wounds all heels ... things have a way of catching up with us. The choices are ours. We don't have to live very long to discover this is the way life, as God designed it, works. Forget for a moment I am a pastor ... any psychologist, any business leader, any competent doctor, any wise teacher, any experienced parent or grandparent would say the same thing: the sooner we learn to make good choices, the better our chances for finding lasting contentment.

To be clear, "choice" is not a moral good in and of itself. I think few words have been more politicized and propagandized than the word "choice." Choice *can* be wholesome and desirable; choice can also be mischievous and destructive ... it all depends on what is chosen. Interestingly, the Greek word for choice is "haeresis;" we get our word *heresy* from it; the essence of heresy is wrong choice. We can (*and often do*) commit "heresy," we choose poorly. God's will for us is that we make choices which lead to *life*, and that's why He says to us through Moses so much more than "STOP THAT!" He says, "*I have set before you life and death ... therefore choose life, that you and your children may live!*" There are destructive choices and there are constructive choices. There are choices that will make us and those who love us stronger and better, and there are choices that will wreak havoc in our lives and theirs. God desires each of us to make choices that lead to full, satisfying and abundant life, which brings me to the final thing to be said:

There is one choice that supersedes all others, a choice I believe most, if not all, of us here this morning have already made, or we wouldn't have faithfully braved the adverse weather to make our way to worship this morning ... and that is to choose not only life, but the One who calls Himself the Life ... and the Way, and the Truth. To choose Jesus and His ways is to choose life! Choose the sweet pain of disciplined discipleship of our Lord, not the pain of regret that comes from a life without the One who is the source of all life, goodness and joy ... in this life and forever. Choose life ... choose Jesus Christ!