

Sermon Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Life Choices – Choices for Life

13th Sunday after Pentecost

September 7th, 2025

How many choices does the average person make during the course of a day, what's your guess?

Some researchers say it's about 35,000 a day – or one decision every two seconds during our waking hours. Now, granted, that includes a lot of choices we make subconsciously, like shifting in our seat or tilting our head. But even without all those subconscious decisions, we still make a staggering number of choices – in the thousands each and every day. I just want to give you an example of my morning: I chose to get up when the alarm went off. I chose to do my daily strength and back exercises. I decided to take a shower, and then to get dressed. What shall I wear this morning? I decided to have breakfast, and what food to have for breakfast. Then I made the choice to go over my sermon one more time, before deciding to brush my teeth put on some makeup. And then the most important decision this morning: I chose to show up for work... (now you know what my usual Sunday morning looks like).

We don't really think about most of the choices we make each and every day, but they are choices nonetheless. And here in the U.S., with its relative freedom of choice and a level of affluence many in this world can only dream of, *we* have plenty of decisions to make. But if there is no food, you can't decide to eat. If you have very little and limited foodstuff available, or you are in a place like a refugee camp or a prison, you don't get to decide what to eat – you eat what's there or what's set before you. If you own but a few clothes, you don't have the luxury of being a fashionista, but feel lucky to have something to put on your back at all. If you don't have a roof over your head, you can't decide to go home. If you live in a totalitarian system, you can't make a choice about what news to watch, what books to read, what art to behold, or where to travel.

Having choices in many regards is a blessing, wouldn't you agree? But could the plethora of choices also be a curse?

Has anyone here ever seen the comedy 'The good place' with Ted Danson and Kristen Bell, either on TV, or Netflix? I personally think it's a brilliant show. The premise of the show is as follows: several people who didn't make the best life choices end up in 'the good place' after they die, seemingly by mistake. And 'the good place' is a place that seems like paradise, well, at least at first. One of those people is Chidi, an ethics professor – for me personally the most interesting of all the characters. For those of you who've seen the show: what is the one thing that drives people crazy about Chidi? He just can't make a decision, he just can't commit, be it in this life or the next (or the next – or the next...those of you who've seen the show will get the joke). And whenever he makes a decision, he agonizes about the implications, he's double and triple guessing. What would have been, what could have been, if...? For Chidi, choices are a curse. And

just imagine, with the several thousands of choices the average person makes per day, life for Chidi is just agonizing.

That Chidi is a professor of ethics doesn't help, on the contrary: he knows that, whatever choice he makes, there are ethical implications – often of the negative kind.

And the topic of ethical dilemmas becomes a pivotal plot twist during the show (and I don't want to spoil it for you, but invite you to watch the show yourselves). We live in such a complex and complicated world now that we can't help but make choices that are not necessarily good, but often present a lesser evil. Often, we have to choose our poison...

Choices, making decisions, can be difficult or even agonizing. But some choices shouldn't be – they should be a no-brainer. With that in mind, let's look at today's scripture lesson: here, God talks to the people of Israel after they've escaped slavery in Egypt, have wandered 40 years in the wilderness, and finally are about to cross the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. During those 40 years, God's given the people plenty of guidelines for life together as a society – among them the 10 commandments, but those are just the tip of the iceberg. There's a total of 613 laws God gives to the people. And, by the way, in the Jewish tradition, those 613 laws are called the 'mitzvot', which is the plural of mitzvah (as in Bar/Bat Mitzvah); and mitzvah means commandment, but in the sense of a life-giving and life-fostering rule, which may restrict individual freedom to just do what one pleases, but enhances the life of the community – and when the community is strong, it benefits everybody. And so we already hear in the Book of Leviticus that there is one commandment that is at the heart of every other commandment: love God with all your heart, and all your strength, and all your mind - and love your neighbor as yourself – a rule that Jesus will cite and expand in his time.

In today's scripture lesson, God basically tells the people of Israel that they have a choice: follow those 613 laws that are based in love and meant to be life-giving and life-enhancing for the community - or not, which leads to adversity, and the erosion and death of community and society. 'Today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses,' says God. But God cares about the people, and so God urges them at the same time, 'Choose life! Choose life, so that you (in the sense of y'all) and your descendants may live.' Well, the Israelites did okay for a while – but life-denying and life-destroying forces managed to take over, manifested in the exploitation of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (in other words, the most vulnerable in society), the unequal distribution of wealth, injustice, and the abuse of power. Just read the prophets of the Old Testament to get a sense of all the choices God's people make that lead to the death of a healthy community and society. The prophet Amos would be a good start. And God's not happy about it, but urges the people – and especially those in leadership – again and again to turn around, to repent, to choose the way of life set before them.

So how do you think we're doing today as community and a society? Do we follow the ways of life God sets before us? Are we blessed – or cursed? Or both?

Looking at how divided we are as a people over many issues – a lot of them trivial, like the controversy over the Cracker Barrel logo -, how people and God's creation are exploited and sacrificed on the altar of mindless consumption and greed, how we justify or at least tolerate cruelty against those on the margins, how we celebrate and exercise extreme individual freedom, often at the expense of society at large (key words vaccines and gun laws), and how our communities erode more and more, I think we can safely say that we have a tendency of not choosing the blessings and ways of life set before us. Of making the wrong choices and experiencing the curses that come with them.

But not all is lost. We still experience light and moments of blessing as the darkness seems to be closing in. Faith, hope, and love, those divine life forces, break through, stubbornly, again and again, like the weed that breaks through the concrete. They break through when we choose compassion over judgment and indifference. When we choose to compromise and acknowledge our interdependency with everyone and everything created rather than insist on reckless individualism and freedom. When we share rather than accumulate more and more for ourselves. When we break bread together, be it around this table or any table, not only sharing food, but of ourselves with each other, listening to each other's stories. When we resist the forces of dehumanization, destruction, and death that have crept into our life as society and are in danger of being normalized. When we follow the mitzvot, God's commandments, which are rooted in love and are meant to bring life to the community at large – and not just enhance the lives of a few.

We have a choice. And God still urges us, as God urged the people of Israel roughly 2,600 years ago, to choose life – in the big and dramatic choices we make, but also, and especially, in all the little decisions we make that have an impact on others. God still urges us to choose life, with all its complications and complexities and messiness and beauty, as God is knowing full well that our decisions might have negative consequences, even though our intentions are good. God implores us to embrace this life we are offered – a life that is grounded in love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, the eternal life to the fullest for all, which begins right here, right now. Choose life. Choose love. And you and all shall be blessed. Amen