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Scripture Readings:
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:21-37

Choose Life

Before we go anywhere with these texts I want to remind you that this gospel text follows the text in which we are called blessed. Just a couple verses prior to what we just heard Jesus said “You are the light of the World...You are the salt of the earth.” These verses are situated in the midst of calling and promise. Matthew is preaching a long sermon here, just as in Deuteronomy Moses is preaching a long-winded text to the people of Israel asking them to Choose Life rather than be consumed by the ritual observance of the law.

If we lose the context we are going to be tempted to set ourselves back up for judgment of self and others. I know for me this judgmental law toting Jesus is not what I signed up for. Jesus is supposed to make the law more human, more doable, less ridged and black and white. So what am I a liberal, postmodern United Church Christian supposed to do with a text like this?

Well, first of all I want to let you know that I am going to look at this passage as a whole today. I am not going to go into a lot of specifics about the rules of marriage and adultery and murder and lust and sex although that might make for a juicy sermon I am guaranteed to get it wrong, and sweat a whole lot as I feel the need to address my personal confessions. The fact is every single one of us falls into that list of those who have committed the “I shall nots.” If you think you might have squeezed your way out I suggest you go back and look again. If you have never been angry, or insulted someone, if you have never judged another or held a grudge then you might have made it by without committing one of the listed sins. But the likely hood of that is well...impossible so I am going to stick with the true fact that everyone of us is found in Matthew 5 both because we are blessed and because we have sinned.

What Jesus calls us to in this text is unattainable. But let’s consider his point. We are blessed creations of God, made in God’s own image. God desires to bless us no matter who we are. Jesus has called us salt of the earth and the light of the world. So if we are blessed and have within the very presence of our being a ability to love one another Jesus is reminding us to live in that light. He is reminding his disciples that living the law for the sake of the law is simply not the point. The old law is good but it is not enough to build a life of righteousness. To live the standards Jesus speaks is to live out the kingdom of God.

So perhaps this portion of our scripture is unattainable if we believe it is about judgment. What if it were about recognizing the love of God for us and one another within it. What if this text was about loving the lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and loving our neighbour as

ourselves. Then what this text does is calls us to stop and notice, to wonder What does the life of a follower of the most Holy look like. What is a religious life like after all? Just as we do today if we focus on the rule of the law we miss the point of intent.

I'll admit that I didn't get to the text really early this week (that is rare for me) but when I did read you I won't believe the context in which I sat. You see, I spent the majority of this week both being refreshed in my training and training others in areas of boundaries and abuse. The United Church of Canada has a very clear and strict policy in this area. This week all clergy and staff of the UCC were mandated to attend a Boundaries and Sexual Abuse prevention workshop. We gathered together to ensure we knew not only the policy but the intent and reasoning behind it. For many of us we understand why such policies need to be in place - just as they are for doctors, counsellors, and teachers. But some wrestle with why there needs to be such strict guidelines, and why this year they became even stricter. For me it is because those boundaries give us the ability to live more freely. We know our guidelines and they help remind us of who we are called to be as Christians and leaders. We are called to 'care for our flock.' We are called to love, respect and support and in that we are to do no harm.

Now some folks began to panic recognizing the impossibility of that. I have said to a lay person who placed me high on a pedestal that I can guarantee I will let you down. It is part of being human. What I strive for on the other hand is to never let someone down with the intent of harm. I think these are the same kinds of things Jesus is calling for. He is saying throughout Matthew 5 you are my people whom I love. For the sake of all people live into who God has created you to be. Keep your commitments, strive to work through all circumstances. What I am hearing is contrary to the popular belief that the way we live really does matter. We are situated in promise and calling. We can choose to see those boundaries as a lack of freedom or we can choose to see them as life giving. I choose life.

Because when we reduce the Christian life to a checklist of morality and piety we will find ourselves proud when we succeed and devastated when we fail. We miss the point of the laws and the scriptures. We fail to understand religion. Religion comes from the latin "ligare" - the root of the word ligament, meaning to bind. Religion is the way you are attached and connected with God. When we put ourselves into sin boxes we reduce God, we ignore the relationship and make it an accounting system.

I don't know if you have ever been in a relationship where you felt like everything you said or did was marked down in a box like a graph table of failures, and flaws, and hopefully a good box here and there. I know a lot of people who have and I know that kind of relationship lacks freedom.

Freedom is when we remember the relationship of life. When we breathe in the blessings and live out our salt and light. True religion as Moses says is to Choose Life. Choose the way that offers life to as many as possible, not just for a moment but forever. One commentator said before we fish for people we need to know who we are and who we are called to be. That is today's story.

We are blessed no matter what. But how we live into that blessing matters. We can choose who we want to live as. God is saying here I am in this world. And I live through you and so this is who I call you to be. You are not simply what you do your behavior and identity are welded together.

What does it mean to live who you are created to be?

I heard from quite a few of you this week how you are salt and light. Thank you for your responses, many of them touched my heart and I know for many of you doing this assignment helped draw you closer to your identity in God and Christ. I would like to share with you now some of what I heard. In this place and beyond you are blessed, you are salt and light and you are living into who you are created to be. I had some fun making a word collage of what you sent me. I encourage you to be blessed, and recognize yourself and others in this.

(To alleviate some panic I will tell you now that I won't use your names).

I learned this week that you shine your light as you hire people who really need it to do odd jobs, and as you knit prayer shawls and toques, and make quilts for the community.

I learned that On Wednesday night the Bethany Unit made up 23 treat bags for the Women's Centre filled with toiletries and cosmetic samples as well as a Food Basket for them to raffle at their store.

I learned that you are salt and light as you take people to appointments even when their gratitude is hard to see

People have told me some of you are light for them because you listen and offer a positive perspective and attitude.

Some of you offer the salt and light of advice and wisdom even when you don't always see the results of changed lives

You try to be honest and trustworthy, and help others in need.

You strive to be good friends and listeners.

I love how some of you admitted that *most* of the time you do these things with a willing heart but it can be hard. Sometimes being salt and light calls us to stretch ourselves to see the face of Christ in the most unlikely times and circumstances.

In this place people are salt as they prepare meals for other with a desire to enhance their life.

You are salt and light as:

You encourage forgiveness.

You listen even when you can't solve the problem

You appreciate God's world with gratitude and awareness

You do your best to value the earth and preserve it for future generations.
You share your resources with those who do not have all that you do.
You value loving kindness and pray for peace and justice.

You care for children and seek to teach and offer them hope and light
You try to live the mantra " May I see the face of Christ in others and may they see the face of Christ in me".
You ask yourself when you are frustrated or angry "What would Jesus do?"
You sing or assist with the choir
You seek to offer a light presence that others might be lifted up.
You participate in things like UCW, worship committee and others
You bake for funerals or assist at the tea

When you help others you recognize how fortunate you are.
You work and care for people with disabilities, with children, with adults, with seniors, and friends
You volunteer for a variety of agencies, you care for the community, and you throw parties for the neighbours.
Some of you are salt and light as you are intentional in your life and as you work and live as a critical thinker.

Some of you have chosen to do overseas work, and some have chosen to daily pray for others, some of you do your best to always believe in new possibilities, you volunteer and seek to live light every day in your work lives.
You won't be shocked that many of you let me know how difficult this was to do and a few of you could only do it for others. But that was the point in a lot of ways it was to help remind us of our identity. We quickly forget who we are, and that we have been called salt and light, that we have been blessed to be a blessing along with so many before us.

Some of you were shocked to discover that you actually do have the light of Christ in your very being. That in discovering how you live salt and light every day you discovered more of who you are and you remembered how then you shall be. Our lives do have purpose and meaning and that is why we are here to continue to discover that and live into our wholeness.

Thank you for sharing your salt and light. I am going to figure out a way to keep this sort of thing going. I think I will put this list on our blog and perhaps other places. I invite you to continue to add to it. Choose life in the light of Christ.

Amen.