

“Choose Life”

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Matthew 5:33-37

When have you felt most fully alive? That’s one of the questions we began the officers’ retreat with yesterday. And it was interesting how many different answers we heard.

Several people mentioned feeling alive at the birth of children or grandchildren. And someone who had never had children herself also talked about feeling alive by being able to connect with children, and discover the world through their eyes. Someone else talked about hosting the Children of Uganda. These children and teens were from such a different country, but they were genuine and alive. They touched this man and had a real effect on his family.

One person felt fully alive when alone, riding his bike up a mountain. It was the feeling of really exerting himself, getting through the pain and being present in the moment. But someone who is a self-proclaimed “control freak” spoke of an event where she was able to stop exerting herself, let go, and let someone else worry about the details.

Another spoke of traveling and discovering amazing new places, while someone else spoke of gardening in her own yard, getting into the soil and smelling the dirt.

Several people mentioned creating either a work of art, or a project at work that came out well. Working hard to create or produce something they could really be proud of made them feel alive. Someone else said it this way: being actively involved, doing something that has an impact, for example, volunteering in Guatemala.

One person said she feels fully alive every morning. She wakes up happy and she feels alive all day long... definitely not an experience shared by everyone in the group. But we were happy for her! And lastly, someone said the first time he entered this church he felt alive. He knew it was going to be a place where he would flourish. He could be himself here, and make meaningful contributions to the community.

What makes you feel fully alive?

At the officers’ retreat we also talked about times we felt disconnected, bored or dead inside. For many it had to do with feeling alone: being an only child, feeling homesick or estranged from family, losing friends who changed when they got married and started having children, or feeling frustrated when others were not listening or understanding.

Some people felt dead because of things going on inside themselves. More than one mentioned depression, and how that can make them feel disconnected or dead inside.

Someone spoke of being out-of-touch with her own feelings, and cut off from herself. Another talked about having to do things for his job that he didn't feel good or right about.

What kinds of things make you feel dead or alive? And is it possible to choose life?

Susan read from Deuteronomy this morning, some of Moses' last words before he died. The Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, and were looking forward to entering the Promised Land. Moses knew he wouldn't be able to go with them, so he delivered these words from God, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..."

According to Deuteronomy, there are definite ways to choose life, and they have nothing to do with pregnancy. We choose life by loving the Lord our God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments (vs. 16). Loving, walking, observing. Some people think religion is about staying out of trouble and being good. But that's not really what it's about. It's about saying "yes" to God. It's about loving, and being aware and connected to God and God's creation, being aware and connected to our true selves, and being aware and connected to other human beings. It's about practicing our faith, not drifting along passively as a spiritual spectators, but walking mindfully through life, in harmony with God's ways.

Choosing life does not come automatically. It takes effort on our part and the stakes are high. And Deuteronomy has a dire warning to those who choose badly. Apparently the future for the Israelites was not guaranteed. If they chose to turn their hearts away from God, if they stopped listening and refused to hear, but bowed down to lesser gods, then they would surely perish.

There are many ways we close our hearts to God and stop listening. Sometimes we get a particular idea or plan set in our minds, and cling to it without questioning or stopping to consider other options. There is not always a clear right or wrong in every situation. But if we are to discern the path that most leads to life, we must open our minds and hearts and consider different possibilities.

Another way we close our hearts is to let our lives get so busy, we have no time left to think about what we are doing on this earth, and no awareness of all the little choices we make every day. It's not just about mere physical existence. It's about being aware and alive inside. As one of our elders pointed out, Jesus chose life by being willing to suffer and die on the cross. Sometimes the best way to be fully alive is to face death. To choose life means to say "no" to the things that cut us off from our true selves, that make us turn away from others, or close our hearts to God.

In that book I would like you all to read with me during Lent this year, Practicing Our Faith, Shawn Copeland writes a whole chapter about saying yes and saying no. He

says if we are to choose life, we need to become more conscious of our decisions, and struggle against self-centeredness, against materialism, . . . against apathy and indifference. Choosing life sometimes means having the courage to say no. We say no to anything that crowds God out, so we can say yes to a way of life that makes space for God.

Philip read Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount this morning, "Let your word be 'yes,' or 'no:' anything more than that comes from the evil one." In that passage Jesus was really talking about making oaths. According to Jewish law, an oath was binding, depending on how closely it was associated with the name of God. So, for example, if you say "I swear to God," people should take it more seriously than if you simply said, "I swear it's true." But Jesus said, skip the oath-taking altogether and just tell the truth. Be willing to say a simple yes or no, and mean what you say. That is choosing life.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10;10). God wants us to be fully alive, full of life in abundance. So may we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and walk mindfully in God's ways, choosing life. In Jesus' name. Amen.