

Courageous Obedience

A sermon preached by Rev. W. Dale Osborne on February 13, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church
Lectionary texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

Every waking hour of every day of our lives we make choices. You and I make hundreds of choices every single day. Sometimes our choices are completely open to our own heart's desires. On other occasions our choices feel rather forced. For instance, your parent may offer you carrots or broccoli but they make it clear you need to eat one vegetable or the other at dinner. Some of our choices feel pretty simple and non-life altering. "Shall I read the old fashioned newspaper this morning or shall I read my news over the computer screen." Other choices seem pretty important and cause us no small measure of anxiety. The high school senior might ask herself, "Do I attend NC State next year or Virginia Tech?" Setting that question into proper perspective is the more difficult question a child of immigrant parents might ask. "Can I afford to attend college anywhere in North Carolina even though my grades are good enough to qualify me for any school on the east coast?" Then there are the extremely life changing choices that the sober addict might ask himself. "Do I choose to use my drug of choice today or am I able to stay clean and sober one more day?" All of us make choices every day. The choices we make take insight, time and courage in order to choose well.

There is a very real and provocative choice set in front of the Israelite people by Moses in our reading from Deuteronomy today. These 12 tribes who have banded together to form a collective people are on a journey to a promised land of sorts. Moses has been their leader for much of the journey. He and others prompted the tribes to pack up and leave Egypt when the time was right. They fled together into a dark night with only a promise of Yahweh's guidance to comfort them. Their journey was treacherous and their faith in Moses and Yahweh probably waxed and waned along the way. As they camped on one side of the Jordan River, preparing to cross in the near future Moses grabbed their attention with these words, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 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, loving the SOVEREIGN your God, obeying her, and holding fast to her; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the SOVEREIGN swore to give to your ancestors.**"

Moses instructed the people to choose life over death by obeying the ordinances and laws for life that Yahweh had given them from the mountaintop. Choose life over death and destruction by choosing to be obedient in the face of adversity. The tribes had to take in these words and make choices as individuals and as members of a particular tribe. They had a choice to make and it their choice would take courage as well as wisdom.

After reading this passage from Deuteronomy set in history over twenty five hundred years ago, I was reminded of a modern group of tribes who had to make choices as individuals and as members of a tribe in order to achieve success. I am now going to make a television reference so forgive me and lend me your careful ear if you are not familiar with this particular program on the Fox network. On Sunday night, February 6, following the triumph of Green Bay over Pittsburgh, a show about High School life came on the television. Raise your hand if you know the program that followed the Super Bowl on Fox. That's right, I am talking about the show called GLEE. A show where three particular tribes are constantly running into each other with remarkably angry consequences. The three tribes are the GLEE club singers, the Cheerleaders and the football team. One tribe is considered geeky, weird and unpopular because they choose to sing. The Cheerleader tribe is very

successful in competitions. They are extremely popular and utilize half the school's budget for their needs. The football player tribe loves to win on the field and enjoys bullying the Glee club tribe in the hallways. Each tribe has a particularly dynamic adult leader who tries to guide them to whatever promised land they desire. The interesting complexity about these tribal configurations is that several football player tribesmen sing in the Glee club tribe and several Glee club singers cheer in the Cheerleader tribe. In last Sunday night's episode, the tribes were forced to make choices of the heart and mind in order to achieve a level of success and cooperation. The promised lands they sought were a state championship in football and the ability to work together during the halftime show. Individual tribe members had to make serious choices about how they would achieve or be denied success. Separate tribes had to make choices about fairness and justice in the midst of great pressure from opposing forces on the football field.

They were not choosing life or death on the television show, but I know many youth in High Schools and Middle Schools surrounding our church who have to make crucial decisions about life or death in many of their choices. What do I do when seemingly countless members of my peer group are choosing alcohol and other drugs as a way of fitting in or masking their pain? What choice must I make when my boyfriend or girlfriend thinks tonight is the best night to give in to the desires of the flesh? How will I face tomorrow if my parent chooses to beat me whenever life gets too demanding? These are extremely complex matters for developing brains to address. It takes massive amounts of courage to answer these questions in a life-giving way. It takes courage and obedience to some basic God-given and Christ-centered laws of the heart and mind. Love God with all your heart and mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you love me, feed my sheep. Choose life over death in the midst of chaotic circumstances.

But following a leader and being obedient to a power outside yourself is extremely hard for some individuals. It takes a lot of soul-searching and faith to step forward and follow the teachings and directions of someone beyond yourself. There are many examples of such courageous obedience in ancient scripture and in modern life. Consider the disciples who left their nets to follow a compassionate teacher and rebel named Jesus. Consider the thousands who heard Doctor King ask them to march against injustice and despicable racism when the bridges seemed so distant and the police with their dogs so violent. Consider the thousands of Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt who faced violence and death in the courtyards of Cairo as they followed a call to freedom. It took unimaginable courageous obedience for all of these people to make their way out of their own individual self-centeredness and into the path of justice, compassion and outrageous hope. Choose children of Abraham and Sarah, choose children of Martin and Coretta, choose children of Mary and Joseph. Choose life over death in your own life. Choose life over death in your tribe's existence. Choose life over death so that redemption and reconciliation might steer the course.

Choose life over death. Look inside yourself and ask God to ignite the courage you need to be obedient.

Every waking hour of every day of our lives we make choices. Like Moses of ancient days, I encourage you to choose life.