

“It’s Our Choice”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 13, 2011
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:17-30

The events we have been witnessing in Egypt over these last few weeks, and especially these last few days, have been truly amazing, as we have seen how powerful the movement for change can be when people decide and choose a different path. The hard work that lay ahead for the people of Egypt and other nations who have had a taste of freedom from oppressive regimes, we pray will be guided by the hope and promise of fuller and freer lives for all of their citizens. The fact that in Egypt all that has been accomplished so far has come about with a minimum of violence has captured the imagination and the hopes of the world community. This unlikely revolution is having ramifications far beyond the borders of any one nation. It seems as if a beacon of hope and light has shined into dark and dangerous times. We pray that these movements of hope and promise will not be overtaken by darker forces of fear, hatred and revenge.

The power to choose a different way, a better way, is a power that isn’t easily mustered, neither in the case of nations that have long denied political freedoms to their people, nor in the case of individuals or groups generally. In biblical and theological terms, just because we have free will doesn’t mean we will exercise it for the good. But we can. Things can be different, if we choose it.

Moses, in his final sermon to the Israelite people (Deuteronomy 30), recounts all the mighty acts of God that have brought them through their long suffering to the threshold of the promised land – their liberation from slavery in Egypt, their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the establishment of God’s covenant with the people, and the giving of the law and the commandments – Moses preaches to the people, “I call heaven and earth to

witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him . . .”

It is their choice. As generations and centuries passed it was a very inconsistent record. At times Israel lived as if there were no choice to be made, as if the certainty of God’s blessing was held more firmly than the desire to obey him, cleave to him. Israel’s prophets would remind them of the choice whenever their rituals and their sacrifices were seen as fulfilling their religious duty, while widows suffered indignities and aliens in the land went hungry. The heart of the law, meant as a blessing for the people, was gutted, and only its form remained. God never forgot his promises, but God’s people proved all-too forgetful – and the church’s record is no more shining than Israel’s.

Throughout the centuries Israel was occupied by one foreign power after another, and various parties arose in reaction to these occupations. Some would take up arms against their oppressors, and they were inevitably crushed. Others sought religious purity, determined to keep their distinct identity as God’s people in tact in turbulent times. In Jesus’ day the Romans were in charge of things, and the Pharisees fulfilled the role of the keepers of the faith by maintaining a strict observance of the religious law. If only everyone would strictly observe religious law, the world would be a better place, and Israel’s place would be secure in it.

I am reminded of the late 1960’s and early ‘70’s when there was a lot of turbulence in this society – and I, like so many of my cohorts were caught up in the times of what we thought were radical change, and in many ways they were. I had more than a few, mostly loving arguments with my parents about all that was going on, and what it meant, and I remember my Mom saying that if only people would respect the police and go to church like they used to, things would be a lot better. That was about as convincing to me as I

imagine those young Egyptians were convinced by President Mubarak assuring them that he would carry out the reforms they have been demanding.

Jesus didn't reject the religious law of the Israelite people. He was no revolutionary in that sense. In fact he said that he came "not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them." He told his followers that they had to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees – and then those jaw-dropping sayings: The law says you shall not kill, but I say that everyone who is angry with a brother or sister is liable to judgment. Calling somebody a fool will land you in hell. The law says don't commit adultery, but I say to you that looking at a woman lustfully already constitutes adultery. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out; or if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. He goes through several more impossible demands, and ends by saying, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (v38)

Somewhere along there every one of us hits the wall, and we realize that attaining righteousness will require that a power beyond us will have to take charge. So where does the choice come in? *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."* (John 3:16-17) The greatest choice we can make is to return that love. Like any human love we falter. We can and we do turn away from the love of God. We make the choice to return the love of God, but the power to change, the power to truly be transformed, relies on the grace of God.

One of the great emphases of the Protestant Reformers was on the grace of God, especially when it came to how we understand the role of the law and the commandments. No human, John Wesley said, is able to attain righteousness, to fulfill the religious law. The law, rather, shows us how imperfect we are, how much we are in need of God's grace,

and how we ought to live into the law of love – mindful that, as Jesus teaches later in Matthew’s gospel, all of the law hinges on these: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and to love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

If we are to make any spiritual gains, have any sense that we are growing more fully into the likeness of Christ, we need to be open to the fullness of God in our lives. Are you aware of the depths of God’s love for you – just as you are? There are no other requirements or pre-conditions. To be perfect is not so much a matter of keeping the law of God as it is embracing the love of God. And once you’ve embraced it, you can let it go – to others.

You see, when you’re talking about God, you’re talking about relationships. The Ten Commandments, the most well-known of the commandments of God which altogether we call the law of God, are about relationships – the first five about our relationship with God, and the 2nd five about our relationship with others. We do not seek to keep the law of God for the law’s sake, but for the sake of our relationship with God and with others. Jesus wants us to regard each other as God regards us, and treat each other accordingly. The goal and end of the law is the life and health of our neighbor.

The spirit of those Egyptians, young and old, celebrating all night in Kahrir Square in Cairo, is that now anything is possible! Certainly as time goes on and the hard work of building a new society of justice and opportunity runs up against difficult choices and limited resources, enthusiasm will have to turn toward determined and disciplined efforts to bring the dreams of freedom into reality. But all they wanted was the chance to do so.

What about us, I wonder? “For freedom Christ has set you free,” St. Paul writes, “stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” We realize our freedom – our freedom from sin, our freedom from small expectations, our freedom from fear, as

we embrace God's love in Jesus Christ. Can we do better? Can we be better? Can we be better Christians, a better church? By that I mean can we be more faithful to God in our attendance at worship, in our studying of the scriptures, in our life of devotion and prayer? Can we be more loving toward each other? Can we grow in our discipleship through spending more of our time and resources on behalf of others through the ministries of our congregation and the larger mission of the church? Can we grow in numbers of brothers and sisters, young and old, who might share the in the good news of Jesus Christ through the life of our church? Can we stand, can we sustain a greater portion of joy, a deeper measure of love, a fuller sacrifice of service?

We can't be perfect as God is perfect, but we can allow a perfect God more room in our imperfect lives.

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