

## *Living with honour and respect*

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-26*

The promise is this – We belong to God. We belong and we have purpose. So why do we feel so anxious and fearful when we read scriptures like Deuteronomy today? Along my faith journey they have been many years where the idea of obeying God didn't fit with what I believed God was, who God was, and how God wanted to be in relationship. If God is a loving God, then why would God cast down punishments and destructions upon people, upon me, if I was living a faith-filled life? The God of the Old Testament felt a bit like somebody constantly looking down on me ready to point out all of my shortcomings and mistakes. And then through coming to a deeper understanding of Jesus we come to know God in a different way. God who loves us unconditionally. Through Jesus we learn about what it takes to live in healthy relationships. We learn about how we are to treat one another. Jesus gave us the greatest commandment that he wants us to live by to love one another as we would be loved.

In the passage from Deuteronomy God wants us to obey the Commandments, the decrees, the ordinances, that God has given - by loving the Lord your God and walking in God's ways. In that passage, in that moment God invites us to choose life. To love God is to choose life. To choose life is to love God. Most religious institutions have fallen into uh – I wouldn't call it a trap but have fallen into a bit of a pattern of referring to God's Commandments and reflecting on them as restrictions. They define the Commandments and they talk about them as rules we have to live by. And they use the Commandments, and we, at times, use the Commandments in the scriptures to put the fear of God into us, in order that we don't fall out of line. Guilt and judgment are powerful tools that can hurt and harm people. That have often been used by religious institutions. We have been taught from infancy how to behave according to God's rules. We've also been taught from a young age, at least most of us, how we are expected to behave in church. To sit quietly, bow our heads. But I wonder if this is what God truly intended.

Jesus came and taught us that it is not our place to judge one another. Jesus shows us how to live a life with God at the helm, leading us, guiding us – where God is at our center. God is in our heart. Jesus guides us in a different way, and at the same time we see Jesus on earth challenging rules and authorities when it seemed that they were using these rules to benefit humans where one's attention would turn away from God and turn inward. If we listen to verse 17 from Deuteronomy again – listen carefully, “but if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are lead astray to bow down to other gods and serve them I declare to you today that you

shall perish and you shall not live long in the land.” Like many of the scripture passages in the Bible we need to read the scriptures through the eyes of God rather than through the eyes of our own humanity. Instead of seeing these Commandments as restrictions what would happen if we consider them as prescriptions on how to live? How to live a faith-filled life. How would the culture of suspicion, fear, and the need for control change if we like Carol J. Dempsey, a theological theologian suggests, we should see obedience as a means to listen, which involves more than just hearing and following. What if we defined obedience as a discernment process that involves not only the mind and will, but also, and most especially the heart.<sup>1</sup> If we saw obedience as listening would this shift our interpretation and help us to live with more respect, and more trust in this world. Would we be open to hearing the call from Jesus that we heard in the Gospel passage today. To forgive and to reconcile. To move away from opposition. God has given us free will and we have a choice. And today God is inviting us to choose life. To choose a life full of blessings. God is inviting us to surround ourselves with what we love. Friends, family, pets, nature, silence. Deep conversation. Feasts. The Arts – just to name a few.

We choose life when we serve others. We choose life when we seek Justice. We choose life when we live with respect in creation. And we choose life when we celebrate God’s presence. Does any of that sound familiar? These are parts of the United Church Creedal Statement, entitled a new Creed, where we proclaim that we will celebrate God’s presence, love and serve others, seek Justice, resist evil, and to live with respect and creation. We are being invited to choose life, not just as individuals today, but also as a community of faith. The promise is that we will be blessed. And that we will be able to live in land that God swore to give to our ancestors. If we choose life we will bring blessings upon those who are also yet to come. We will pay it forward. We will create a space for this to continue.

So now is the time to live in hope. Now is the time to listen and discern how we as a community of faith will live according to God’s Commandments and ordinances. Now is the time that we need to reconcile with one another. We need to practice respect. We need to remember that it is not our job to inform people on how to live their lives. How to behave in church. It is our job to encourage and support each other as we learn together about how God has called us to live. It’s our job to lift up each other, rather than tear each other down. And we are called to rejoice in another’s discovery or success rather than being critical of what was missed. When we choose life and embody God’s love we are open to listening deeply. To engaging in dialogue. To asking hard questions and speaking the truth in love, and trusting in God, and also in one another.

Brett Younger writes, “worship with all your heart, pray genuinely, love your Community of faith. Believe that God loves you and remember the stories of Jesus. See Christ in the people around you. Share God’s love with someone who has forgotten it. Delight in God’s gifts. See that all life is Holy. Open your heart to the spirit. Search for something deeper and better than

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<sup>1</sup> Carol J. Dempsey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 340.

your own comfort. And live in joy beneath it all. Let God make your life wonderful.”<sup>2</sup> As we prepare to move in that time of year where we enter the annual congregational meeting. And as we prepare to embark on renewal and visioning as a community of faith may we do so practicing respect. Let us also practice discernment where we obey by listening deeply without agenda to what God has to say. Where we notice where the Holy Spirit is at work within us and among us. May God guide us, living our faith in abundance, full of blessing, full of grace. And let us find our inner chicken. Let us truly be passionate about what God is offering us. Let us be truly committed to one another and to this mission. Know that you belong to God. Trust in God’s promise and live life with purpose according to God’s way and in doing so blessings will abound. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup> Brett Younger, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 343.