

A matter of life and death

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

November 2, 2008

It's not too difficult! It's not out of your reach!

It's not up in the sky, so you don't have to ask, "Who will go up and bring it down for us, so we can hear it and obey it?"

It's not on the other side of the ocean, so you don't have to ask, "Who will cross the ocean and bring it to us, so we may hear it and obey it?"

It's not on top of some faraway mountain, so you don't have to ask, "Who will climb the mountain and discover the secrets hidden there and bring them back to us so we may know what is required of us?"

It's not too difficult! It's not beyond your reach! It's here with you! You know it! You can quote it! What is the greatest commandment?

Love the Lord your God with all you heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

See! You can quote it! You know it! So obey it! Do it! It's a matter of life and death!

What do a retired missionary couple, a young married couple expecting their first child, a working mom with three teenaged children, and a twenty-something female graduate student have in common? Not much! Not much, except this: in a few moments, they will all be standing here in front of you, making promises to God and to you, as they are welcomed as the newest members of the First Congregational United Church of Christ church family.

Why? Why would this diverse group of folks be drawn here? Why would they want to worship here? Why would they want to join this church family?

I can't answer that question! I am sure their reasons are as different as they are from each other. You will have to ask them!

But I do imagine that this much is true. They must be comfortable with you and they must be comfortable with me! They must feel at home here, feel welcomed here. And they must take some benefit from being among us, from worshipping with us. Perhaps comfort or companionship. Maybe joy and an emotional uplift in hearing the music or being among friends. Maybe reassurance in the midst of daily stresses or a spiritual challenge to their ways of thinking about themselves and their lives. We -- you and I -- surely must be meeting some need for them.

But really, my friends, my church family friends: it's not about us! They are not here because of our virtues! If we were not here, they would have found another church to join. Most of them have been part of other church families in the past and most of them will join other church families in the future.

It's not about us! In ways they may not even fully understand or appreciate themselves, they have come here seeking ... the ineffable. They are looking for God, looking to come to where God is or to bring God to where they are. They want to be where God can reach them, where God can heal their wounds or forgive their sins or comfort their griefs or fill their emptiness or calm their fears or quiet their worries.

But it's more than that, too. It's not just about what God can do for them, but about what they can be and do for God. They want to join themselves to something that matters. They want their lives to be in some way significant. They understand or they feel somehow, somehow, that life without a relationship with the living God is incomplete, unfulfilled, off track, and they have come to find fulfillment and direction and purpose and meaningfulness.

And they have come to join themselves to you, so that together we may be about God's business, so that together we may fulfill our ultimate destiny.

Is that being too dramatic? Is that over the top?

No! It is about our destiny, our human destiny, the destiny set for us from the very beginning:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You set before each one the ways of life and death. There is a way that leads to life, and we come together to help each other choose that way. We come together to choose life.

When you woke up this morning and covered that first yawn and stumbled into the bathroom, were you thinking about all the life or death decisions you would be facing in this day? I wasn't! Sure, there are times we face some pretty momentous choices, choices that determine the course of the rest of our lives, but mostly we just muddle through the day, fulfilling our duties, enjoying a few distractions, checking things off our to do lists, washing the dishes and brushing our teeth.

But I am telling you, the word of the Lord is telling you, that day by day, even moment by moment, you choose between life and death, between good and evil, between God's blessing and God's curse.

When you nurse a grudge, when you tell a lie, when you speak ill of a colleague behind their back, when you walk past suffering without turning aside, when you hear of injustice without being moved, when you know of a neighbor's need and do nothing ... you choose death. It is death you choose, because a relationship is broken, a person is defamed, trust is shattered, injustice is unchallenged, and the destroyer wins.

But when you forgive a hurt, when you give a gift, when you offer comfort, when you visit a lonely neighbor, when you are moved to tears by a stranger's suffering, when you defend people being treated unfairly, when you do battle with injustice, when you speak out against evil even when no one else cares, when you pray, when you turn your prayers into deeds, when you pray or sing or just keep quiet so you can enjoy God's presence, so you can just enjoy God ... then you choose life!

It's not too difficult! It's not beyond your reach! It's here, with you, within your reach! You know it! So do it! It's a matter of life and death ...