

EASY CHOICE?

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Grace Church in New York
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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. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Because I did not care about the outcome of this year's Super Bowl, last Sunday evening my intention was to watch just the 4th quarter, and even then, only if the game were close. When I checked the score at halftime it appeared to be a blowout so I continued doing other things. Then one of my brothers texted me at the beginning of the 4th quarter, saying I really ought to watch. Why? I texted back. He replied (and this is a quote): for the sheer joy of seeing Tom Brady "play fifteen hopeless minutes, knowing that he will not have a chance to overtake Joe Montana as the first quarterback to record five Super Bowl wins." So I watched along with 111 million other people, as Tom Brady orchestrated the most remarkable comeback in Super Bowl history, and earned his fifth ring. He made it look easy.

Someone else who may or may not have been watching is a former star of the New England Patriots who would have been playing in the game had he made different life choices. Aaron Hernandez currently resides in a maximum security prison in Massachusetts, where he is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. But just a few short years ago, his life was full of blessings, not curses. As a young, starting tight-end for the Patriots he was breaking all sorts of records. In 2012, when he was just 22-years old, he signed a contract extension to play with the Patriots through 2018. The contract was worth \$40 million. Hernandez was poised to enter the Promised Land. He was set. Life should have been easy.

It all began to unravel in the summer of 2013 when the body of Odin Lloyd, a friend of Hernandez, was found dumped in an industrial park. The police followed clues that led to Hernandez. They obtained a search warrant of his house and discovered evidence implicating him in the murder. He was charged, tried, and convicted of the crime. Why did Hernandez kill Odin Lloyd? Why did someone with the world at his fingertips, with nothing to gain and everything to lose commit such an horrific deed? What was Lloyd's offense? Only this: Odin Lloyd dated the sister of Hernandez's fiancé and bragged about it. That's all. Greatly angered by this, Hernandez took Lloyd's life, and threw away his own.¹

*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. We heard these words in today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy. On the brink of the Promised Land, Moses was preaching his final sermon to the people he'd led out of Egypt. Finally, after forty years of nomadic life in the desert, the Hebrew tribes would take possession of the land flowing with milk and honey. What would God require of the people? Moses put it like this: *If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command 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 you are entering to possess.* The Commandments were the key to communion with the living God. Follow the Commandments and you choose life and prosperity. You will be happy, and God will be happy. *Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord,* sang the Psalmist.*

Nothing would please God more, and thus make you happier in the end, than for you to have the Commandments nailed down pat.

I will never forget a boy named Dan, who was in the first Confirmation class that I ever taught. It was actually right here at Grace Church in the late 1980's when I was the seminarian. Harold Barrett, the rector, had put me in charge of the youth class which, if I recall, consisted only of Dan that year. Dan was about 12, eager to please, and willing to say anything if he thought it would make the class move along quickly. When we came to the 10 Commandments, however, he seemed to take note. Perhaps the life of faith wasn't mumbo-jumbo after all. He could do these things; in fact, he was pretty sure he was already leading a blameless life. Scanning the list, he furrowed his brow and concluded that to the best of his knowledge, he'd never killed anyone. Dan didn't quite know what adultery was, but when I gave him the basic idea, he quickly declared his innocence of such a great offence, and I knew that he wasn't just trying to hurry the class along. For Dan, the Commandments were easy.

In just a few weeks we'll be into the season of Lent, and we'll begin our Sunday liturgies with the Penitential Order, which includes a recitation of the Commandments. After each one we'll sing, *Lord, have mercy upon us*, or *Amen. Lord have mercy*. It will all be very solemn, piously and properly done. On Ash Wednesday we'll disfigure our faces like the hypocrites, and kneel until our knees ache. But seriously: why the penitence? Why all the "sorry for this" and "sorry for that?" According to the Psalmist the Commandments are clear and direct. According to Dan and according to Moses, the Commandments should be easy.

No doubt you know the longstanding advertising slogan of the office supply store, Staples. More than a decade ago Staples wanted to convey to customers the ease of the shopping experience at their stores. So they transformed their operations to make it so, and then deployed the slogan: THAT WAS EASY. They even created something called the "easy button" that you can purchase at the stores. I have one right here. It's a red gadget with the word "easy" emblazoned on it. If you press it a voice says: THAT WAS EASY. And so it should go with the Commandments we will recite in a few weeks. Thou shalt do no murder: THAT WAS EASY. Thou shalt not commit adultery: THAT WAS EASY. Just follow the Commandments and you choose life. How much easier can it be? Everyone can press the Easy Button, and receive a participation trophy at the end of the Lenten sojourn.

Sadly, you and I know all too well that when theory meets practice, life turns out to be not so easy after all. Yes, Aaron Hernandez is an extreme example, but in dozens of daily decisions the human heart has a strange penchant for choosing death and adversity instead of life and prosperity. Even when we choose well and do our best to follow the Commandments, it's no guarantee that we'll stave off adversity. The Bible is filled with laments from apparently righteous people who see the prosperity of the wicked, and wonder why they suffer no consequences. *Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?* cried Job (21:7).

Then, to the paradox of the prospering wicked, add the hard words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading from Matthew (5:21-37). *"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder.' But I say to you, if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."* He went on: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* Imagine: murder is merely the obvious tip of an iceberg. To the best of my knowledge, I've never killed anyone, and my guess is, neither have you. But hidden from sight beneath the waters we sail across is the frozen mass of anger, and the jagged edges of hatred that will wreck the ship. It's the same story with adultery. To steer clear of the act itself is one thing. But according to Jesus, the law of the Lord applies equally to the distorted desire of

lust that lies beneath the surface. So much for the Easy Button. And as for the participation trophy? No thanks!

Finding good news in the words of Jesus that Matthew records for us today, that is not easy. Nevertheless, if we pay careful attention not only to today's reading, but what comes before it and after it, we'll discover the grace of our Lord. Are you ready to work with me for a few minutes? This will take some getting through, so hang with me. You may recall a verse from Matthew (5:17) that we heard in last week's reading. Jesus said: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.* Then Jesus went on to say that for the people to fulfill the requirements of the Law, their righteousness would have to exceed that of the Pharisees, the most observant keepers of it. The Pharisees were the spiritual equivalents of Tom Brady. Much as it may pain us in New York to admit it, Tom Brady is the best there ever was. So were the Pharisees at the game they played: keeping the Law of the Lord. But their efforts would never achieve the miraculous comeback.

In other words, it is not only "not easy," it is not possible for mortal men and women to keep God's statutes and lead a blameless life. "Good luck," is what Jesus seems to be saying to those who insist on achieving communion with God the old fashioned way, through the Law. It will make about as much sense as this: you travel three days to Jerusalem to sacrifice at the temple. You purchase an animal to offer, but realize you have to apologize first to someone at home. You leave the animal by the side of the altar, travel three days back, say you're sorry, and make the long journey again to Jerusalem, expecting to find the animal where you left it. Such are the demands of the law. Good luck. You might just as well cut off your hand and tear out your eye. Jesus was using hyperbole to highlight the Law's impossible demands. But he was also offering another way: fulfillment of the Law through himself.

Who did Jesus think he was, claiming to fulfill the Law that no one else could? In today's passage it's important to note the dramatic *I* statements of Jesus, as in: *you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times ... But I say to you.* With these words, Jesus was doing what no teacher of Israel would ever dare do: he was placing himself on a level above the Law, as if he were the giver of the Law. Who was the giver of the Law? Moses? Not Moses, but God through Moses. In fact, Jesus was proclaiming his own divinity, his own oneness with the Giver of the Law. If indeed Jesus is one with the Father, the Giver of the Law, not only then would he not abolish the Law, but also he would know how to fulfill it. Later on in the Gospel, Matthew will record Jesus' making the offer: *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).* Putting it bluntly, it's as if Jesus were saying, "Here's the Law. Here I am. Choose." The way to choose life is to choose Jesus. The way to fulfill the Commandments is by following Jesus. The way to enjoy communion with the living God is by receiving Jesus at the center of your soul through the Word, the Sacrament, and this Christian community. The way to choose life is to choose Jesus.

Recently, I read a story about Clarence Jordan, who was a New Testament scholar and author of the Cotton Patch series. He was also a farmer and founder of Koinonia Farm, an intentionally interracial Christian community in Georgia. One day early in his ministry Jordan was preaching at a white Southern Baptist church somewhere in the deep south. The time would have been the late 1930s or early 1940s. The theme of Jordan's sermon was that we are all one in Christ: black and white, male and female, Jew and Greek. What is more, he claimed that the burden of racial reconciliation was on southern whites, because they had been the perpetrators of slavery.

At the end of the service the elderly matriarch of the church, livid with anger, strode down the aisle to confront the preacher. “I want you to know,” she hissed, “that my grandfather fought in the Civil War, and I will never believe a word you say.” Jordan had sensed it was coming, and he was ready with a reply. He said, “Well, Ma’am, I guess you’ve got to decide whether to follow your granddaddy ... or follow Jesus.”²

The way to choose life is to choose Jesus. *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.*

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¹ Hernandez now stands charged with two more murders, in a drive-by shooting that occurred in 2012. The trial is set to begin on February 13.

² The story is told in The Beloved Community, by Charles Marsh, 2005, p. 57.