

This morning I want you to think about times in your lives that were significant transitions, times when your story had to change, and you had to think about who you were or are in light of the changes. Perhaps it was when you started a new job, had a health crisis, entered a new relationship, became a parent, lost a spouse or a child. For me, it was definitely a health crisis when I started seminary and also the arrival of our kids. Life took a turn, and I had to choose what the new situation meant for who I was and what I valued. This was for me a narrative turning point, as Caroline Lewis calls it.

I ask you to consider those turning points so that you can relate to what is happening in our first and gospel lessons for today. They both include narrative turning points. Life is taking a new turn. New turns require processing and assessing who we are considering those turns. Now admittedly in Deuteronomy and Matthew, we are experiencing a community going in a new direction and evaluating its common life. This is generally how the Bible thinks. We think individualistically; the Bible thinks communally.

Let's look first at the communal narrative turning point from Deuteronomy. The people of Israel are about ready to enter the Promised Land, and Moses is preaching a sermon, reminding the people of Israel that they are on the edge of something big and that they must now decide who they are and how they will act. "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity," Moses says on behalf of God. "So, as you are entering the land, which route are you going to take? If you obey the commandments of God, you will have life. If you disobey them, you will get death. Choose life that you and your descendants may live and live long in the Promised Land."

The author of Deuteronomy is not known for being overly nuanced. We Lutheran types tend to believe in a lot of both/and, not either/or. For us, life is complicated and ambiguous. We speak of "bold sinning," meaning that sometimes for us the choices in life are about bad and worse, not good and

bad. So, Deuteronomy is a bit challenging for us. It's too *either/or* for us. But if we are honest, we'll admit that at certain turning points in our lives, we do have to make decisions, decisions that may be about life over against death. If a marriage deteriorates and divorce becomes a necessity, if you lose a loved one, you will have to decide how you move forward. You will have to ponder how you choose life, in light of death.

Now perhaps some information about Deuteronomy will help us not be so critical about this black and white book. The story we receive from Deuteronomy appears to be focused on the entrance into the Promised Land, but what we know about Deuteronomy is that more likely it came into usage at a very significant narrative turning point in the history of Israel, the time after the Babylonians devastated the country of Israel, destroyed its temple, and sent the brightest and best of Israel into exile. No temple. No holy city that they could recognize. Leaders gone. Families grieving. What was Israel to do? Where is it to go now? What choices shall the people make? This really is the context of the book of Deuteronomy.

The assumption of the writer of Deuteronomy—and we could rightfully argue with this assumption—is that Israel got itself into this mess. Deuteronomy assumes that Israel's not choosing the ways of God is what brought them into death. They had entered the Promised Land, and from the beginning of the time there, they did not live according to the commandments, decrees, and ordinances of God. And this created the mess.

Now again, we might disagree with this assessment. I know I do. Doing good doesn't always produce good results. And doing bad doesn't always produce bad results. But nonetheless, what Deuteronomy seems to be saying is that the nation has a chance now for a do-over. You will notice the number of times it uses the word "today" in our text. You blew it in the past. Now you can choose differently. Today you can choose the ways of God. This narrative turning point is providing you a new opportunity.

The disciples are facing a narrative turning point in our gospel lesson for today. They have been called by Jesus to be his followers. And now, they

are being taken up on a mountain, where they are given insights into what it means to be who they are, what it means to live in light of the reign of God into which they have been invited. Before they head off into the world, before they eventually reach out to the Gentiles, they need to know the kind of community they are to be, the kind of community they want to invite people into. And Jesus, like Moses in Deuteronomy, tells them that this community is shaped by the teachings, the Torah, the law of God, especially as that law is interpreted by him in a new, and in some ways, more demanding manner.

Now honestly, what appears in Matthew, like Deuteronomy, is probably not so much about what Jesus is saying to his disciples, but what Matthew is saying to his audience, the community that he is addressing. His community of Jewish Christians is probably at a turning point. They are having to figure out what to do in light of the changing character of the people coming to them and the changing nature of the faith, the moving from Jewishness to a faith shaped by new people and new ways.

What does this newness mean for who we are? What is our community to look like in light of all these changes, in light of a mortgage being paid off and all kinds of new people being welcomed? Well, Jesus says on the mountain, it is to look like a life centered on relationship. It is to look like a life where everybody is treated with dignity. In our community, anger is not to be the final word. Unresolved anger is corrosive. After all, we murder people with our words and our anger, Jesus says. Our community has better things to do than to be preoccupied with issues of anger. In our community, reconciliation is our gig, which is what the sharing of the peace in our worship service is all about.

Now, it is somewhat comical how Jesus makes this point in today's text. And I suspect that the comedy is somewhat intentional. As he tells us that murdering with words is just as egregious as murdering with a knife or a fist, he tells us that those who are angry with their brothers or sisters are liable to judgment, liable to a crisis precipitated by God. And then he says that those who insult their brothers or sisters are liable to the city council.

Can you imagine the city council having to deal with all the cases of people insulting one another? And then his serious comedy continues as he says that if you call someone a fool, a jerk, you will be liable to the hell of fire, to the fire of the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. If that is the case, loads of people are going to be incinerated in the garbage fires, especially those who drive a lot.

As the infraction becomes less serious the punishment becomes greater. This is a fun way for Matthew to bring home the point. Life in the kingdom, as John Petty says, is marked not only by a different way of living, but a different way of understanding. All bets are off, if you are trying to figure out this Jesus world on the basis of everyday thinking and operating. You think you are doing well because you haven't killed someone and ended up in the jail? Sorry! You are just as broken as those who ended up in prison for murdering. So, you can't use that to justify your life.

We in the community of Jesus understand things differently. We act differently. We seek reconciliation. We go to the nth degree to discover it. We in the community of Jesus take relationships so seriously that we are not flippant when it comes to our commitments. For us, marriage matters, and respecting marriage is a high value. We will not live as if other people are consumer products that we throw away when they aren't useful to us, when we have had enough of them. People are not products, and while we are at it, they are not to be objectified, turned into objects for our lust.

By the way, in Jesus' words today about marriage and lust I think we are experiencing him standing up particularly for women. Women in Biblical days had few legal rights. They were often at the mercy of men, who often could use them, abuse them, and throw them away, leaving them without economic resources and a place of honor in their society. In my reading of Jesus today as he talks about marriage, divorce, and lust, I find him standing tall for the dignity of women.

It is treating people with dignity that will mark the community of Jesus. In some ways, that is what Jesus is meaning with his words about vows and swearing on heaven, earth, the hairs of your head, or as we would

say, a stack of Bibles. In the Jesus community, we believe so much in dignity that we live in trust. Swearing on things is for people who don't trust in other people. Oaths serve to underscore doubt. Reconciled people speak the truth to each other and live in trust with one another. Their "yes" is "yes", and their "no" is "no."

Now I want to warn you against literalizing everything that Jesus says into today's portion of the sermon of the mount. He obviously is using exaggeration as he tells people to pluck out their eyes and speaks of people burning in the garbage dump for calling others "jerks." He obviously is living in a very different world than ours when he seems to be so hard-nosed about divorce. Divorce can be a right, life-giving option for some people. Some relationships take the life out of life. They need to come to an end.

We should not treat Jesus' sermon as a checklist. But we should know what characterizes the community we want to inhabit and want to invite others into. Love, the resolution of anger, reconciliation, forgiveness, dignity, trust—these are what mark our life together and what we are being asked to choose as we confront the turning points in our lives.

To choose these things is to choose life. "See, I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity." Choose life, not death. Choose that which builds up life, people and community. And reject the things that tear people, life, and community apart.