

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 12, 2017  
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

### **Choose Life**

Lord may your word pierce our hearts, demand our souls, and so fill us, that our lives may be a reflection of your amazing love, Amen.

In 1860 Milton Bradley created his first board game called the Checkered Game of Life. It was a morality match of virtue vs. vice, where the object was to be the first player to move from infancy to happy old age with the highest points. Landing on a constructive trait or situation would send the player forward with points, while landing on a place of vice would reduce the score and impede a player's progress. It was the first game with a purpose to teach a lesson of success through integrity and right living.

In the 100th anniversary edition, in 1963, it was simply called the game of life. Money was added to the equation, and vice and virtue were taken out of the game. However, there was a point when the player reached the day of reckoning and had to choose between moving on to millionaire acres, if earned, or to take the risk to become a millionaire and possibly end up at the "poor farm."

The most modern version rewards players for taking risks to earn money and collect life tiles. Along the path you might end up in bankruptcy or you can get revenge by suing. The object is to accrue the highest value at the end of the game. It is an interesting and not so subtle shift from placing merit on integrity to assigning worth based upon accumulation. If these board games reflect a change in our culture's values, today's readings might just make us squirm.

Both the gospel from Matthew and the first lesson from Deuteronomy give us a heavy dose of the law and its consequences. While we might dismiss these passages as grounded in the societies they were given, we would do well to pay attention to the warning and the promise of the texts. Understanding their context will help us to hear the assurance of relationship that undergirds the words spoken to God's people. This tough love language seems constricting and judgmental. Yet, could this invitation to accountability and clarity of values actually be a path to freedom?

As the book of Deuteronomy opens, the Israelites had lived 40 years as nomads in the desert. They camped in the plains of Moab east of the Jordan, preparing to enter the land of Canaan. The failures of their past were behind them in the desert, the challenges of the future, before them across the river. Moses, nearing the end of his life, gave his last sermon to his people. Like anyone whose time is short, he didn't mince words. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." They had been given the power to shape their lives according to the commandments and in not so subtle ways, their priorities had shifted. Offered a covenant as a people of God, he reminded them of their responsibility to live their promises. Moses urged them to love the Lord their God and to keep the commandments, for in so doing, they would choose life.

Likewise, in another place and time, Jesus' words pierced the hearts of his followers. "Let your word be 'yes, yes, or no, no,' anything more than this, comes from the evil one." The gift of the

commandments made it possible for people to align their lives with God's intentions. His teaching reached beyond the slippery slope of human interpretation of the law to reveal its objective: valuing relationship, to God and one another. He used traditional teachings as the foundation for righteousness and intensified his message to illustrate how easily people justify actions that are not of God. Jesus moved his examples from outward acts to internal orientation, from murder to anger, from adultery to lust. Like Moses he offered both warning and promise. No one could live completely autonomously without consequences, but there would be blessing in a life of relationship to God and neighbor.

We live in a culture that often equates accountability with control, clarity as rigidity and surrender as weakness. The grey areas of life cloud our vision, confusing our priorities. We can all cite examples of how religion has been misused to perpetuate a personal agenda, to attack another, to justify misbehavior. In a world that often devolves into an "ends justify the means" orientation, these tough love reminders may feel irrelevant or archaic. But friends just like the board game of life, we all facing a day of reckoning. When our time is short, we will not be focused on what we have accumulated, but on relationships we have cultivated.

Here at Holy Cross, there have been periods in the desert. Certainly our nomadic beginnings as a mission meant that those founding members had to stick together to find their way. We stand now at the shores of our own river Jordan and look to God to keep in front of us those guiding principles that make our path straight. To choose life, is to trust in the promises of God. Let the promise of relationship and God's covenant of love lead and guide us into our future. Let us each examine our hearts for the strengthening of our integrity and strive for the path to right living. To match our lives with the covenant we have made in baptism is to live in freedom and clarity.

Last week during a Eucharist service at Church of the Holy Cross in West Pittsburgh, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry spoke with tough love to his people. "Don't be afraid to be people of love. Don't be afraid to stand up for the name of Jesus. Don't be afraid to reclaim this faith again. Episcopal Church, we need you to follow Jesus. We need you to be the countercultural people of God who would love one another, who would care when others could care less, who would give, not take. We need a revival inside the church and out, he says, not just in the Episcopal Church. For there is much that seeks to articulate itself as Christianity that doesn't look anything like Jesus, and if it's going to look like Jesus, it's got to look like love. Jesus came among us to show us how to become more than simply the human race. He came to show us how to become the human family of God. And, my brothers and my sisters, in that is our hope and in that is our calling."

Soon we will be entering into the season of Lent. This is a time most appropriate for self-examination and re-commitment to our covenant priorities. I pray that we ask ourselves each day if our words and actions are life-giving or producing little deaths. God has given us the power to choose to be a force for love, to live with integrity and to be accountable. As we play this game of life, may we find the straight path with God's help and be a blessing to all we encounter. "I set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life." Amen.