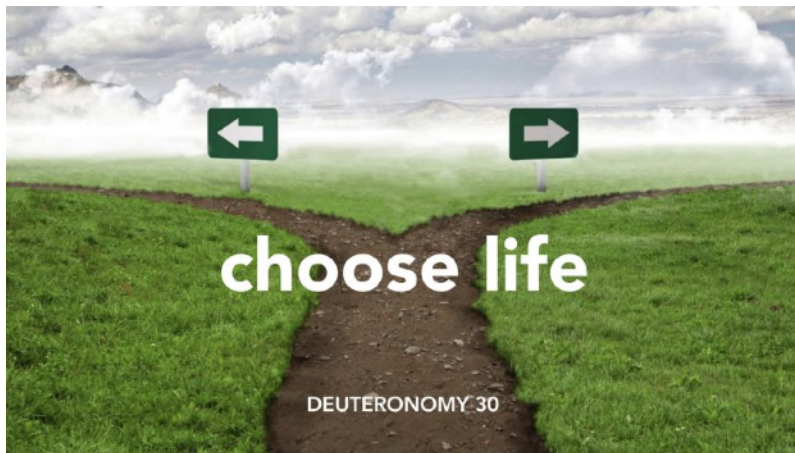


Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Racial Justice Sunday
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
February 12, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“From the Heart”
Christian Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20



Credit: Credit: West Palm Beach Church of Christ

At the Brattleboro Centre for Children Board meeting last Thursday, I was asked to pray. In my prayer, I mentioned that God *compelled* us to this work as a mission of the church. And because of that God-given *compulsion*, I asked God to provide us wisdom, strength, and inspiration for the journey ahead.

At the close of the prayer, Jack Bixby gave a quizzical look, as he often does, and, I think, rightly commented that God perhaps *calls* us, rather than *compels* us to the work of our church's mission. Now, I meant what Jack suggested. And I think my term, 'compels', was correct, that is, accurate. But, I believe that Jack was

more correct, that is, *more* accurate. The reason is that the word ‘compels’ has connotations of, at worst, force, a lack of choice, or, at best, an obligation. If you are ‘compelled’ to do something, often, not always, but often, your heart is not in it. The word ‘call’ can also have connotations of reluctance, as was the case with Moses, Jeremiah, Elijah, and even Jesus. But more often than not the word ‘call’ suggests choice, free will, and even, at best, a yearning. If you are ‘called’ to do something, often, not always, but often, your heart is in it.

I am thankful to Jack, for he had me thinking and praying the rest of the week about this morning’s message. Jack raised for me, and hopefully for all of us, the very important spiritual lesson that relates to ‘motivation’. What is our motivation for following God, for having a life of faith, for doing the ‘right’ thing? Our motivation matters. Why? Well, the apostle Paul perhaps said it best, if we do this, that, and the other thing and we do them not in love – well, then the proverbial well is poisoned. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 13:2 “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” You see, our motivations often determine if even our good actions are selfish, manipulative, or condescending. If our actions have not the love of God, then they are often not actions worthy to be done in God’s name.

Our scripture reading from Deuteronomy fascinates me for exactly the same reason that Jack's good comment did. Our reading from Deuteronomy raises the issue of motivation and suggests three prospective ones in only three verses.

The setting for Deuteronomy is on the Plains of Moab, shortly before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is essentially three substantive sermons that Moses delivers to the Israelites before they embark on a new epic journey. Although many ascribe Moses to be the author of Deuteronomy, this strikes me and many other scholars as odd since Moses narrates his own death (Deuteronomy 34:1-8) – which would be beyond 'insightful'.

Listen to verses 16 through 18 of Deuteronomy 30: "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding 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 that you are entering to possess. But if your **heart** turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall **perish**; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess".

As I see it, there are three reasons to lead a life of faith presented by Moses. The first motivation is, perhaps, 'compulsion'. The Law. We have to. It is obligation. If we don't, we are going to get whacked. It says right there if you choose wrong, death will result. The second motivation is choice. In other words, strategy and tactics motivate. We do the right thing because we benefit. Moses said, if you choose right, you will benefit; you will be blessed. The third and last motivation, we do the right thing naturally, because we are inclined to, because, well, because we love. We do, because God who is Love would. And we wish to love like God. I hear this motivation when Moses spoke about how the Israelites should "love the Lord your God" and voiced a concern about 'hearts' turning away. In three verses, we have Law, Strategy, and Love as motivations for leading a life of faith.

In many ways, the Bible as a whole narrates how our ancestors in faith evolved from a faith that (while including Love), emphasized the Law to a faith that (while including Law) emphasized Love as a motivation to lead a life of faith. [Sadly, from my perspective, when love did not seem to win over the Romans, the book of Revelation sort of threw everything back to coercion instead of Love with threats of eternal damnation and apocalypse. Anyway.]

Truth be told. If I were to be honest about my own faith life, I am motivated by strategy, by tactics. I used to be a Pharisee, motivated by Law. I would like to continue to grow spiritually and move to a place whereby my faith is entirely motivated by Love. I believe that requires, one, relationships (with all of you in this community of faith) and, two, God's intervention in my life to mold my heart.

Where do you see yourselves? What motivates you and your faith and actions? Law? Strategy? Or Love? Let us pause in silence and contemplate on that question.

No matter where you are. No matter where I am. No matter where Jack is. God loves us all. God speaks to us all. God journeys with us all. In the Book of Deuteronomy, and throughout the biblical text, no matter what currently motivates us, Law, Strategy, or Love, God still beckons us and calls us to move closer and closer to a life of faith that is entirely motivated by Love. I want a faith that comes 'from the heart'. That is where I want to be. I have some way to go yet. How about you?

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".