

You Get to Choose
Deuteronomy 30.15-20 and Matthew 5.21-37
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Epiphany 6A
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It was eleven years ago this month that I was diagnosed with preeclampsia in my first pregnancy. I was gaining considerable weight between doctor's appointments, and my blood pressure was rising higher and higher. I was not due to deliver my son until April of that year, and we were less than two months into the semester at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Within a month's time I began bed rest at home, monitored with a range of tests with results that landed me on bed rest in the hospital, monitored by more tests. I suspended seminary coursework and focused all of my energy on resting and waiting as many days as I could to deliver a small but healthy baby boy at 36 weeks. He was just 5 pounds at birth and dropped to a tiny 4 pounds 11 ounces before we took him home. None of the clothes we lovingly washed and folded fit. Diapers were all too big. He required constant holding, nursing, rocking, changing, snuggling, and repeating that cycle. My seminary coursework collected dust in a corner, and I vanished into the world of new motherhood as I focused on growing a strong, healthy baby boy. It was surely my first life lesson on the limitations of energy and choosing wisely when the stakes are high. In those early months, though easy they were not, I held onto a remarkable clarity that I was exactly where I needed to be and doing exactly what those days called for me to do.

It was a humbling lesson that still requires some refresher courses: I cannot do all the things all at once. I certainly cannot do all the things and do them with excellence. And the second half of the lesson came in welcoming help: I cannot do all the things by myself. We need each other. Oh, that one is still painful and not always natural for me. Nathan and I had been sleeping in separate rooms for weeks, passing the baby off in the middle of the night so each of us could get at least 4 hours of uninterrupted sleep. His meager paternity leave was long over, so I was home with our needy, not-yet-on-the-growth-charts, newborn son and practically no sense of what I was doing. I began to accept and then learned to ask for help from friends. Opening the door and letting them in. Receiving care as they brought food and sat to talk. Receiving support as they held this baby who always wanted to be held so that I could take a shower. Receiving gentle nudging as one said, "Let's get out of this house and go for a little walk together. We'll only go as far as you're ready to go." Receiving support as I later chose to dust off the seminary coursework and complete my semester over the summer

months. Receiving the grace of friendship as one beloved professor took me out for coffee and said, "You're never going to catch up in this class. How about we make a deal. Write one really great 25-page paper for me, and I'll grade you on that, but you won't earn higher than a B." Sold.

Even when health is good, the sun is shining, and circumstances are ideal, I cannot do everything all at once. I cannot do everything and do it well. I cannot do everything by myself. Yet I have been shaped by a highly individuated culture that values autonomy and boot straps. That way of seeing the world has malformed us for community, separated us from our neighbor, and taught us some lessons that need to be unlearned. For the church in the United States, the highly individuated culture has also malformed the way we read sacred scripture and approach the life of faith. The words of these texts become one more advertisement vying for our attention, and are often muted in our hearing and dismissed as a bad commercial. But the passages before us from Deuteronomy and Matthew are calling to us to be formed in the ways of God and to dare to imagine a life shaped by God's breath.

Choose wisely and mindfully how you use your time, your energy, your love, your wisdom, your words. The choices you make are life and death. And as is often the case, here is yet another example of when "y'all" would be very helpful in our reading. These passages are speaking to us individually, to be sure, but they are addressed in the plural, "All y'all...choose. What's it going to be? Life? Death? Blessings? Curses? The letter of the law? The essence of the law? You get to choose what you do with these holy words you hold and this life you have been given. The stakes are high, so choose well." Karoline Lewis speaks to the collective call on these texts, saying, "Who you are as a disciple is not just about you, but about you as a disciple in community."¹ It's not just about you, it's also about y'all. Us. We. The life together we live out there and in here.

I think these lessons are particularly salient today because the stakes are high right now. The anxiety all around us is palpable and hovering at the surface of many conversations and interactions. When everything matters and everything feels tremendously significant, we *must* come back to the lessons and invitations of our sacred texts and the wisdom of our faith tradition. As individuals and as a congregation, we must choose how we move with the honest acknowledgement that we cannot do all things and do them well, and we need each other to rightly experience this life of faith.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3157

In reflecting on the tense times in which we presently live, I am actively seeking the wisdom of other faith leaders and the words preachers have spoken in other complicated times. With help from Paul Powell, I came across collected sermons of G. Avery Lee, the late, prominent 20th century pastor and lingering presence of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. In a senior sermon on November 6, 1943, at the height of World War II, he preached in the Yale Divinity School chapel about the need for both a personal, individual encounter with the person of Jesus and a collective, social action because of the gospel.

In his words:

“Some of us say the power and the wisdom of God can only be declared in the terms of what we call the Personal Gospel. That is, a preaching of the necessity for man to have a personal experience with God brought about by repentance and faith which causes a resultant forgiveness for the sin in the life of man. The trouble is, we get so concerned for the individual that we forget the society. We issue an invitation to Christian discipleship, someone answers the invitation, we ask them to be seated while we get their case history, then, we let them remain seated for the next 30 years.”

He goes on to list some of what he considers to be “the evils of society”—inadequate, sub-standard housing for the poor, dangerous and oppressive labor practices that ignore the needs of workers, racial prejudice (1940s racial prejudice at that!). He describes the need for an Adequate Gospel that is both deeply personal and boldly social—felt in the bones of the individual and then spilling out into the needs of the world. To skew heavily in either direction is to “let ourselves be limited in the declaration of the good news,” he proclaims.² Friends, let us not choose a safe seat and a limited gospel.

This balance matters because the Way of Jesus is expansive and not limiting. “You have heard it said to those of ancient times,” Jesus begins as he speaks to the lessons of limitation we have inherited. “But I say to you,” he says as he expands each lesson. Each pairing is an invitation to God’s love and a guide to fullness of life. Each expansion meant not just to guide an individual but to strengthen a community. And because “The ‘you’ in both Deuteronomy and Matthew is always plural,” David Lose reminds us, “The law isn’t about meeting our individual needs but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of God’s children can find nurture, health, safety,

² Rev. G. Avery Lee, “If I Preach Not the Gospel”, Senior Sermon at Yale Divinity School, 11/6/43

and blessing.”³ In fact, “Jesus intensifies the law to make us more responsible for our neighbor’s well-being. For by caring for our neighbor we strengthen a community that can best serve as a blessing to the world, God’s constant command and expectation of God’s people.”

I want to be rooted in the people of God. One of the criticisms we have heard over the past few months is that Americans live in bubbles and do not know people who are different from themselves. Living in or moving beyond these bubbles of similarity then limits or expands our worldview. The result of limitation is more fear, isolation, misinformation, and focus on self. The result of expansion is friendship, trust, grace, vision, and hope. In acknowledging my limited energy, I have asked myself lately how I might best live and serve in anxious times. I am seeking the radical expansion of community that Jesus describes. I am chasing expansive relationships that shape my worldview, and right now that work feels radical and subversive. I am being energized, encouraged, and shaped for my work in the world by the neighbors I meet for breakfast, lunch, afternoon coffee, and dinner.

At the close of last week, I was bone tired in a soul-satisfying way because I had talked and listened for hours. I am making intentional efforts to step away from the lure of social media as life and into the real life of conversation and partnership. All month I am talking with Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Caucasian, African-American, male and female clergy and community organizers. We are talking about our values, our hopes, our fears, and the work that burns within us for the good of the world. We are finding ways to partner and connect, naming the intersections of what we hold in common, and listening for any and every opportunity to partner. We are also discovering that sharing our limited energy mysteriously multiplies it because we can do more together than on our own. We need each other.

The ways of God are expansive and not limiting. If you are feeling crushed beneath the weight of your efforts right now, then take that as invitation to choose the ways of life that God offers. We discover the expansive love of God when we choose to step into focused, called relationship with one another, when we welcome people into our lives, when we acknowledge that we are part of a whole.

Friends, you have the same finite time and finite energy I have, and you know as well as I do that the needs before us are many. How will you respond to the world before you? Will you give your energy away talking about what you might do if you could do

³ Some thoughts on “law” via David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-6a-on-love-and-law/>

something? Or will you give your energy to actually chasing an idea and seeing it through? The world needs your best and truest self right now. Your brothers and sisters in this room need your best and truest self right now. Choose friendships that expand your worldview. Choose conversations that resist fear, cynicism, and anger. Give yourself instead to multiplying love, hope, and kindness with your words. Choose soul-satisfying "on earth as it is in heaven" partnerships with neighbors. You cannot do everything, but you can do something and do it very well. You get to choose who you will be and how you will move in the days before you. What will it be? Choose well.