

The St. John's Pulpit

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CHOOSING LIFE

Exodus 20:12; Isaiah 11:6-9; Matthew 5:38-48

Sermon 7 of 14 in Summer Series

The Ten Commandments for the 21st Century: The Calling of Wisdom

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 2017
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



The mischievous grandfather handed the package to his grandson with a twinkle in his eye. He smiled and whispered, “This is my favorite book. My grandfather gave me this book on my eighth birthday. I have been looking forward to giving this book to you on your eighth birthday. This book is filled with stories about people who lie, cheat, steal and murder. I have marked for you the stories that are my favorites. The boy ripped open the package and stared up at his grandfather; “The Bible!?”

The Bible, this leather-bound book that I hold in my hand is filled with violent stories. The Bible itself has been used as a weapon to beat up on people. Religious history is filled with stories of killing based on ungodly interpretations and applications of biblical passages. Streams of Christianity continue to express violence and the ways of death ostracizing persons from The Living God revealed in Jesus Christ as compassionate commitment and redemptive love. Within a short drive of this sanctuary, churches are spitting the venom of hate and judgment today.

Violence, killing and the ways of death are written on every page of human history. Do you know these names: Jose Rodriguez; Anthony Frazier; Shenika Simpson; David Eadie; Bryan Thompson; Michael Morris; Ruby Atkinson; Curtis Atkinson; Jennifer Smith; William Weddington – these are ten of the 50 persons killed in metro Charlotte thus far in 2017. Stories of killing and murder have become so common that we hardly pay attention to the names of the victims or the realities of agony that surround their deaths. Violent crime is up 15% in our city this year. Fear pervades. We can feel helpless in this violent world?

The sixth commandment, ‘*You shall not kill,*’ is the negative way of saying, ‘*Choose life.*’ You have the choice between investing in the ways of death or investing in the ways of life; choose life.

Isaiah describes God's vision of a peaceable world to include wolves, lambs, leopards, goats, calves, lions, young bulls and young children interacting without enmity or fear. In God's peaceable world, cows, bears, lions and oxen have a meal together; babies play near the cobra den; and children reach into the holes of poisonous snakes without injury. When we choose life rather than death, we are not living in a fantasy world; we are nurturing a world where fear dissipates and enemies become friends.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus acknowledges that you have heard those who sell the way of death saying to you, "*pursue revenge and retaliation;*" "*love those who love you and hate those who hate you.*" But, Jesus teaches you to choose the ways of life. And as you follow the teachings of Jesus, you become a teacher of others. You reflect light along the pathway of life when you choose submission, service and sacrifice.

In your worship bulletin, you see the image of a dove being formed by people connecting their lives for the purposes of peace. These people are choosing life. Alongside that dove we have placed lines for you to write in six ways you are choosing life as lifelong learners following Jesus as part of God's Church. If you realize you are NOT choosing life in some way, confess your sin to God and claim God's forgiveness. In this way, you are participating with God in your salvation. God is bringing new life into you; don't kill it off.

1. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE WHEN YOU BLESS SOMEONE.** Each week, you relate with people who have been cursed more than blessed. Please do not undervalue YOUR power to bless. One man reports his decision to respond to jokes based on gender or racial prejudice with an explanation as to why he did not laugh. When you bless someone by offering a listening ear, a sensitive spirit, or an understanding smile you choose life.
2. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE BY PARTICIPATING IN CIRCLES OF HOPE.** In recent months, we have entered purposeful relationships with Friendship Missionary Baptist Church and Providence Baptist Church to create interracial circles of hope. We are modeling for our city pathways of healing. I am enjoying hearing reports of your conversations promoting interracial understanding. Yesterday, Paula and I enjoyed hosting in our home the pastoral couples who lead those two congregations, Dr. Clifford & Brenda Jones and Dr. Lee & Hilary Canipe, By participating in Circles of Hope, you are choosing life.

3. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE BY GIVING TO SUPPORT THE WORK OF THE CHURCH.**

This is more than a pastoral moment of financial stewardship emphasis. When you set aside some of your income that reflects your commitment to God and God's work in the world, you are working against the ways of death. You are a partner with God in transforming lives and offering hope; you are choosing life.

4. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE BY INITIATING FORGIVENESS.** When someone hurts you, they may mean to hurt you; but most of the time, it is a moment that neither one of you want to repeat. Carrying resentment is like letting someone who has hurt you live inside your head rent-free. By initiating forgiveness, you choose life.

5. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE WHEN YOU SEE ANOTHER PERSON AS GOD'S CHILD.** It is common practice to assign status or determine individual importance by shallow external factors. You know how you feel when someone values you as a child of God. St. John's, by welcoming every person into this church as a child of God, you refuse to see any person as a stereotype or someone to draw outside the circle; You choose life!

6. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE WHEN YOU PARTICIPATE IN MT25.** Jesus said, "I was hungry, thirsty, sick - and you served me." And the people were surprised. You are more than volunteers in metro Charlotte. When you serve other people in the spirit of the compassionate Jesus, you are choosing life.

7. **YOU CHOOSE LIFE WHEN YOU INVEST YOURSELF IN REDEMPTION.** The word, 'church,' (ekklesia) means 'a gathering or an assembly of persons for a purpose.' Our purpose, as part of Christ's Church, is redemption. If we send our children to camp and our youth on mission trips; if we worship each Sunday; if we have beautiful music; if we offer excellent learning opportunities; if we provide compassionate care for our preschoolers and homebound members; but do not invest ourselves in the redemption of living souls, we are just another good 501c3. Beloved, when we are God's redemptive community, we choose life.

Let us renew ourselves to God's purpose for us, as part of God's Church. **Wherever and whenever the ways of death arise, we rise higher.** We all know there is more than enough discouragement, disparagement, heartache, loneliness, rejection, blaming, shaming, mean-spiritedness, racism, judgement, abuse, retaliation, revenge, jealousy, grudge-holding and devaluing of persons in this world.

- We are committed to and invested in choosing the ways of life while we work against the ways of death.
- We are committed to and invested in partnering with God to redeem our own sins and the failures of others to bring restoration and healing.
- We are disciples of Jesus Christ, lifelong learners of the ways of reconciliation, and practitioners of resurrection living.

The resurrection power of God is at work in you. Don't kill it; let it mature in the direction of the full stature of Jesus Christ. Choose life! Amen & AMEN



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