

**Sermon for Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany
Annual Meeting Sunday – February 16, 2020
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes**

To Life!

A few years ago when I was serving as the President of the Board of Directors for Abode Home, the social hospice founded by our own Reconcilers, Edwin and Patsy Sasek, I was also engaged in the process of strategic planning with the Board, founding members, invited guests, the Executive Director, and staff. A very gifted consultant facilitated the process and it was amazing on lots of levels, organizationally, personally, and interpersonally. It was a process deeply steeped in honesty, self-awareness and relationality. During the process every participant was required to take a Myers Briggs Type Indicator, the MBTI. Now you may or may not be someone who enjoys those sorts of tests. I happen to really enjoy them. Of course, I had taken the MBTI on other previous occasions and it is interesting to reflect upon how the results of such testing can vary some over time. And I have come to better understand how I work and relate, or in our prayer book language, how I live, and move and have my being in organizational systems, family systems, church systems, in healthy and holy ways. First, last and always, relationships matter. No matter at what level of a system you find yourself, how you relate to the vision, mission and values of a system will determine not only your health and well-being but it will also determine the health and well-being of the whole system in which you find yourself.

Each and everyone of us is wired for relationship. We are social beings and we would not survive without healthy, holy relationships throughout the various seasons of our lives. However, most, if not all of us, have at times in life, found ourselves in toxic relationships; relationships that invite distraction from if not outright destruction of our very souls. In these relationships, we can be held hostage by choices we continue to make that distance us from the very Source of our identity as well as the very Source of life itself, our Creator. At times in my life, it has taken another courageous and trusted companion in my life who loves me enough to have the “Come to Jesus” talk with me. You know, the conversation that may as it begins knocks me completely off my feet, takes me unexpectedly to a place of anger, only to realize that it is the kind of love that reorients me to health and holiness, reassuring me that I can find my way back to the Source that is the presence of Divine by taking serious stock of choices I am making and the consequences of those choices along the way.

Today, on the sixth Sunday after Epiphany, we are blessed and challenged by the first reading from the book of Deuteronomy as Moses addresses the people of God. This is the conclusion of a long, long speech that began at chapter 5 and here we are at

chapter 30 as Moses makes his final plea to God's people. This speech is placed at the Jordan River, just as Israel is about to enter the promised land. It is beyond a powerful speech as Moses knows he will not walk with them into the promised land. Moses knows that he is at the threshold of his own death and staring it in the face, he sets before the people of God the truth and the power of choice. To be human, to be God's beloved people, comes with the power of choice- the choice to live and the choice to die.

Of course, we can hear the urgency in his voice as he reminds them of what they have been through: slavery in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, receiving the Ten Commandments, and wandering in the wilderness. Now, at the threshold of the promised land, Moses lays out the two ways between which Israel must decide: *"I have set before you today, life and prosperity, death and adversity."*

My friends, we are a nation of choosers: paper or plastic? Small, medium, large, or super? Fries or chips? We have become demanding of more and more choices, choices that benefit some over lots of others, choices that include some but not others, and in Moses' language, choices that lead to life and choices that lead to death. We are like those same people who stand on the threshold of the promised land and listen to Moses. We are those same people who must remember who we are, whose we are, where we have been, how we have behaved, what choices we have made and ultimately, how we have been saved, time and time again. We, like the people of Israel, have also to choose between life and death, over and over and over again.

Moses has nothing to lose and knows that Israel has everything to lose so he spares nothing of the truth. Moses tells them, *"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God... then you shall live... But if your heart turns away... you shall perish."* It is an exacting message. One that does not ultimately offer a choice between two goods. Moses says there's only one good choice, the choice that leads to life. The choice and its consequences are clear: Choose covenant, receive life; reject covenant, choose death.

Schooled in a society that shops for "wider selection," we resist any effort to have our choices curtailed. We resist having our choices cut, because it threatens the illusion of our autonomy, perhaps the central and most destructive value of our culture. This value, that is no value at all, for at its core, it is about entitlement, power, and greed. What is mine is mine. The "I've worked hard for everything and you haven't worked hard enough." It's the kind of judgment that ultimately foists life and death consequences upon others who do not have equal access to resources let alone, choice. Perhaps there are significant moments in our lives when we have bowed down to the gods of choice more often than we have been willing to admit.

One commentator I read this week wrote: *"The choices we are faced with on a daily basis are not usually labeled "life" and "death." Most of our decisions do not seem important but the truth of the matter is that life and death are before us every day.*

Every decision has a consequence not only for the decision maker but for the others with whom we share our daily lives. Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter. Life is impoverished with a lack of purpose. We rush to meet deadlines that are significant while ignoring those that are. And we bow before ideas that are not worthy and retreat from those that are costly to us.”

My friends, how we live, the choices we make have consequences well beyond our selves. And it is good not only to be reminded of that but to take to heart the significance of our choices in the lives of others with whom we share life. In God’s economy, God’s desire is for us to choose life, a life of abundant blessings not for some but intended for all. In God’s economy, there is abundant life for all, if as Moses instructs: *“...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... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him... .”*

This is a timely message on this day of our Annual Meeting for Church of Reconciliation as we take an examined look at choices we have made over this past year and as we reflect with profound gratitude on the abundant blessings the Divine has showered upon us over the past year.

Our choices do matter, and they matter to God. We know that as people who follow the Living God, who believe in the Resurrected Christ, that we are commanded to choose life by the One who created all life. Let’s be honest. Sometimes we will get it right. And sometimes, if not often, we won’t. Either way, every day the gift and the privilege and yes, the challenge, is to sort out what life looks like and to commit to choosing life. If we do this in holy relationship to God, to ourselves and to one another, then we can entrust it all back to God whom we love and chose to love us first, last, and always.

While we strive to follow in the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love, when things fall short because of the decisions we make, coming to the altar, offering our confession, receiving forgiveness and making a solemn vow to amend our lives and then be about choosing life once again, is the blessed assurance of our faith.

Therefore, with hearts overflowing with gratitude to God on this day of our Annual Meeting, let us celebrate all that has been and all that is yet to come choosing life all along the way.

Let us proclaim, ***“To life!”***