

**“CHOOSING LIFE”**  
**Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-33**  
**September 9, 2007**  
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When I lived in Duluth, I knew a nun named Sister Joan. She was a Dominican sister who worked as a hospital chaplain. It's hard to know how to describe Joan. She had a light, an inner glow of kindness and compassion. When you were with her, you knew you were in the presence of the sacred, not in a stained glass window, distant from you sort of way, but immediate: a sense of God's presence in the world of everyday. All sorts of people just wanted to be near her. She, more than any other single person in my life, taught me to try to live aware of the potential for holiness in all of life, every moment of every day.

Earlier this summer when I was in Ireland, I had the opportunity to meet another extraordinary religious woman: Sister Mary, a cloistered nun who, at age 19, had made the decision to leave the world and dedicate her life to prayer within the confines of the convent. For 40 years now, she has lived with her community of nine sisters, part of the order of Poor Clares, a Franciscan order. As Franciscans, they make nothing, they sell nothing; they depend entirely on the charity of the world for their daily bread, and their lives are an ordered march of worship and prayer and worship and prayer. Anyone can come to the convent to ask for prayers. Prayer is their only work—prayers for the world, prayers for individuals.

Sister Mary was, in her former life, my traveling companion's cousin Phyllis, and because her cousin had come all the way from America, she was granted a rare dispensation for an hour's visit. I got to tag along. I met her and one of the other sisters from the convent. They both had that same luminousness that I remembered from my friend Joan: kindness, empathy, a comfort with their place in the world that actually reflected their comfort with who they were with God—sure, confident, unconflicted and unencumbered.

I thought of these two women this week as I read this morning's texts: First, from Deuteronomy, Moses' last speech to the people of Israel: “This day I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse: therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.” And then Jesus' hard, shocking gloss on what it means to choose life: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Yikes! What was Jesus thinking? Why would any of us want to choose life, and have that be the life of discipleship Jesus lays out, if these might be the costs? How do we come to understand these words in a way that does not simply send us fleeing as fast as possible in the opposite direction?

Well, I'm going to try. The most common mistake that people make when reading the Bible, particularly the Gospels, is reading them flat. The Bible is not a book of systematic theology designed as a user-friendly “how-to” guide. When Jesus taught the crowds, he didn't do it thinking that these words would

later be written down and universalized. Jesus, in the 14th chapter of Luke is riding high on a series of successes. The rabbi cum miracle man was drawing large crowds—crowds in the thousands if Luke's numbers are to be believed. Jesus was headed to Jerusalem; the people following him knew it. They thought the road ahead stretched from triumph to triumph, and they wanted to be part of the party. Jesus needed to let them know, and fast, that they were wrong, that it wasn't a party that lay ahead. Being a disciple would require something: it would potentially require a lot. But how do you stop a moving train? Jesus needed to get the crowd's attention. These words about hating family to follow Jesus, about giving up one's life, they are at the simplest level hyperbole. They were meant to arrest the crowd back then even as they stop us in our tracks now. So, at one level, we need to appreciate them as that—hyperbole, overstatement designed to get our attention and make a point. But the point Jesus wanted to make is sobering enough: Jesus would have us be clear that following him, embracing his teachings and priorities, to some extent or another, will put us always at odds with the world; it will put us in conflict with the world's values and, depending on the state of the world and the absoluteness of our discipleship, it can set us against even those closest to us. It can cost us our lives. That is the bottom line of Christian discipleship and has been for the past 2000 years.

So why would we choose to take the risk of being Christian? Why do you, each of you here, choose to be Christian? I can't answer that question for you, only for myself, and the reason I choose to be Christian is because, at least in part, I understand that the life we are asked to choose, the life that Christ calls us to, it is truly better, it is more satisfying, it is more abundant than the life and priorities the world offers. I look into the face of my friend Joan or Sister Anne of the convent of Poor Clares, women who many would say have given up everything for their faith, and I see that for them, what they have gained is far more important than what they have given up. There is none of the world's restlessness in them, just a deep contentment and sense of connection to that which is most important.

So am I suggesting that all of us give up our lives in the world and get us to a nunnery if we would be disciples? I don't think so. I do believe that those who give up all, who live lives of absolute simplicity and service, those people possess a special gift, and I have deep respect both for that gift and for the grace of their example. However, for most of us, our lives are and should be in the world. Which some might say is the easier path, because it is less focused, less outwardly disciplined. But our living in the world means that every day of our lives becomes necessarily a juggling act between the demands of the world and the demands of our faith, the temptations of the world and the discipline of our faith. Every day we have new challenges to meet, new circumstances to face. Some days it seems we juggle on one foot; other days, we do it with one hand tied behind our backs. It's hard work. Have you noticed that?

"Choose life," Moses said to the Israelites. For a long time, I thought he meant we should make a single choice for God: yes or no. Either we belong to God or we don't. But it's not just the one choice. It's every choice if we say "yes" to God. Where do we live? What do we eat? What clothes do we wear? Where do we shop? How do we earn a living? How much of our income do we spend and save and give away? How much do we compromise our values to keep our jobs? For what causes do we become activists? The choices go on and on and on, and, as you know, there are a whole lot of voices, both within ourselves and out there in the world inviting us, cajoling us, seducing us to choose on the basis of something other than what is good, and true, and life-giving. Discipleship in the world, even if

we are committed to the task, is not the easy path and that's what Jesus was trying to tell us.

This morning we start a new program year together in the church. It's a good time to remind ourselves why we're here.

Some people would say that we come into the church because we want to be disciples. And I wouldn't say that's untrue. But I think the deeper truth is that we come into the church because the path of discipleship, this juggling we do between the life of faith and the life of the world, it's too hard for most of us to do alone. It can be confusing, irritating, exhausting, and/or painful, depending on our circumstances. So look around you. This body of people can and should be your friends and guides as you try day to day to make the choices that are life-giving for you and your family. This body of people can and should be the community in which you study and learn and worship and pray. This body of people can and should be here to hold you when times are hard and celebrate with you when life is good. That's what the church is for. Welcome to this sacred space. In the words of the United Church of Christ statement of faith, may we here together experience both the cost and the joy of discipleship. Thanks be to God. Amen.