



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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FEBRUARY 12, 2017  
THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

## Choose Love—Choose Life Deuteronomy 30:15-20; I Corinthians 13

Pastor and publisher Peter Marty tells the story of an occasion when the elder George Bush was campaigning for president in our state. He visited a nursing home and stopped to speak to an older gentleman who was sitting in a wheelchair with his head down. “Sir, do you know who I am?” the President-to-be asked. The man lifted his head a little and answered, “No, but if you will go to the nurses’ station, they can tell you.”<sup>1</sup>

We often ask other people, “Who are you?” and we have other people ask us the same question. I daresay that, if we are aware and honest, far more often we ask ourselves, “Who am I?” Sometimes we ask God, “Do you know who I am?” And then add, “If so, please tell me!”

One of the ways we reveal who we are is through the choices we make. Who we are often determines the choices that we make, but it is also true that the choices we make shape who we are. Either way, our choices are an important part of who we are.

When the Hebrew people finally turned the last corner on their decades-long trip through the wilderness and saw the gateway to the Promised Land just ahead of them, they were a different people than the group that scurried out of Egypt following that first Passover meal. Many of the elders who had been slaves of the Pharaoh had died over the 40 year journey. They had experienced many triumphs and numerous defeats along the way. God had never deserted them, though they had often been tempted to desert God. The generation that finally crossed the Jordan River into the land they had only dreamed of were excited about the opportunities that awaited them.

As they stood on the threshold of the land of milk and honey, all of their dreams, hopes, and desires waited ahead of them. Before they could take possession of the land, however, God asked them to pause and reflect a bit. Before you go running off into your new future, God said, I have something to tell you:

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<sup>1</sup>Peter W. Marty, “From the Publisher,” *The Christian Century* (January 18, 2017): 3.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity . . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Deuteronomy 30:15, 19b--20

“Choose life!” God said, and I imagine the Israelites cheered so loudly that the Pharaoh could hear them all the way down in Egypt-land. Then they finally rushed into the land that had been promised to them through their beloved ancestor Abraham.

We know from the long history of the Hebrew people that on some days they chose life and blessing while on other days they chose death and curses, just as we make the same choices. Who are you? Who am I? What do we choose?

Before you assume that this story is the training manual for nun-turned-teachers who are armed with rulers, God’s welcoming message to the Israelites is not merely a threat of what will happen if they choose poorly. It is a welcome to the Promised Land. It is an invitation to come in, find a comfortable place to rest, and enjoy the gift of God. It is a loving parent’s advice of how best to get along in life considering all of the possibilities—good and bad—that lie ahead. God offers advice to the new residents of the Promised Land so that it will be for them a land of milk and honey, of life and blessing. Choose life, he urged them.

Ages later, the Apostle Paul realized that neither Jew nor Gentile had really settled in well to the world. Everyone seemed to make poor choices which resulted in squabbles, petty concerns, and jealousy, not to mention the oppression, poverty, discrimination, and abuse that characterized the Roman Empire. Even within the still-young Church, problems erupted between fellow believers. As he counseled his dear friends in Corinth, trying to help them put aside their pettiness and potentially destructive ways, a song began to play in his head, so he wrote to his friends and reminded them of the words. You know them well:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all

knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13

Choose love, Paul said, for it is a more excellent way to live. Choose love and you choose life. But wait! Beware what you choose. Paul's love is not sweetness and light alone. It is not merely candlelight, candy, and carnations. It is commitment and consistency and character. Everything hangs on love, Paul warned: spiritual gifts, religious rituals, prophecy, mystery, knowledge, generosity, sacrifice, even faith itself is valid only when imbedded in love. What's more, those things we tend to fight over, the differences that threaten to divide us, the rules and insights and values on which we stake our lives, will all vanish while only love will remain.

Love is tough. It is patient and kind, never envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not have to have its way. Love doesn't get irritable or resentful. It celebrates only what is right and true, never what is false and wrong. Love bears all things. It believes it all. It hopes for everything. It endures whatever comes its way.

Choose love and you choose life, Paul reminds us. Decide to live by love and life in all of its fullness will unfold before you. Will it be easy? Not

always. Will it bring warm, fuzzy feelings? Sometimes, but it will also bring pain. Love does not pick fights but often finds itself in the middle of the battle. Love does not seek to injure but is often wounded. Love does not pursue self-reward, but is its own treasure. Love lasts when all else fails.

The other evening I along with others of you had the privilege of attending the concert performance of Douglas Tappin's musical, *I Dream*. It was a wonderful experience and a tremendous boon for Rocky Mount. In the musical, as the movement grows, the decision is made to stage a march in order to draw attention to the issues of civil rights for all people. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy discuss their strategy and Dr. King states unequivocally that he intends to pursue a way that is non-violent. "What pressure can that impose?" Rev. Abernathy asks. "The power to answer a need in our world. The power of love," King responds. "That's a nice idea," Abernathy answers, "though in my rational opinion it won't work, will come to nothing. It's a weakling's way."

Then, turning to address the crowd before him, Dr. King asserts: "Hear me clearly. Love will win the day. Love will overcome. Love must be our way. Love means being patient, being kind, turns the other cheek. Fix that in your mind!"<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the Civil Rights struggle, which resulted in his death, Dr. King chose the path of love to march toward equal treatment and opportunity for all people. On Friday night, I witnessed the power of that kind of love. The room was filled with a mix of people: White and Black and Brown, Caucasian, Latino, Arab, African-American, Asian, tall and short and thin and heavy, young and older and middle aged, children and parents and grandparents, Jews and Christians and Muslims—we were all there. As far as I could tell, there was not one cross word, no disputes, no arguments, no suggestion that someone did not belong, no refusal of entry, no check of I.D., no gossip or insults or snide remarks. There was a spirit in the room of belonging. Love was there. Fifty years ago that kind of gathering would not have happened, but through all of the years of struggle and pain, love persisted and was the chosen way Friday evening.

Paul was not naive. As an ambassador of Christ, he was harassed, jailed, beaten, and eventually died for the faith he lived. Nevertheless, he

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<sup>2</sup>Douglas Tappin, *I Dream*, "Educational Materials for the City of Rocky Mount, NC," (January 3, 2017): 4.

chose the way of love—tough, resilient, patient, generous, forgiving, demanding, redemptive—to find his way to life. Choose love and you choose life. Love and you will live.

During this week and the rest of life to come, whether your thoughts are focused more on that one person whom you consider to be your sweetheart or all of the other people in the world who are our brothers and sisters, when deciding how to express how you feel—choose love. When trying to resolve a problem—choose love. When trying to sort through the larger issues facing our state, our nation, and our world—choose love. Couples, parents, children, and siblings know that it is the power of love that holds people together through all of the challenges of life. For you and me and for our world, love is our only hope. Think about love and all that it is for us. Choose love and discover life. Choose life and you will experience love. Choose wisely and you will discover who you are: God's beloved. Choose life. Choose love. Amen.

February 12, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is our hope and our joy, you have created us with hearts capable of loving and receiving love because you are a God of love, calling us into relationship with you and with one another. You have graced our lives with family and friends who support and strengthen us, who share the joys and sorrows of life, who call us to be our best selves, who walk as companions along our journey. You created us to live in community, to join with others for work and worship, for rest and play, finding delight and encouragement in one another. For the gifts of those with whom we share life, the ways we love and nurture one another, and every good gift which we receive from you, we offer our thanks and praise.

We realize, too, O God, that loving one another can be a risky endeavor. When we love, we are vulnerable to being disappointed or hurt by those to whom we open our hearts. When we take your command to love one another seriously, we may share the pain which others experience, realize our responsibility to respond to their need, or even dare to follow Christ's example of taking on the suffering of others in order to stand with them. Out of the great love with which you loved us and gave yourself for us, teach us to love one another, Merciful God. Where we find loneliness, help us to be present. Where we find sickness of body, mind, or spirit, empower us to bring healing. Where there is poverty, give to us a generosity of spirit. Where we find violence, teach us to be messengers of your peace. Where there is division, enable us to promote unity. Where darkness and despair seem to reign, grant that we might offer the light and hope of Christ. Give to us hearts that are open to one another and to you, O Love that will not let us go, that we might live and love after the example of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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