

## Choosing Life over Death (Deuteronomy 30:11-20)

Last week I spoke about how churches in mainline denominations go through natural dying process and how we, as part of mainline denomination are also at risk of going through the same path with other churches. And I pointed out that God wants us to thrive and refuse to be merely a surviving church. Today and for the next five weeks we are going to reflect on critical choices to refuse to be a surviving church, the choices that will make us a vital and thriving church.

The very first choice for a vital and thriving church is choosing life over death. Life over death seems to be an easy choice. Who would choose death over life? However we often witness people choosing death over life, for example, people who choose unhealthy diet and lifestyle, people who choose drive not safely and put themselves and others in danger of fatal accident, people who choose to pollute the environment, people who choose violence to resolve conflicts and cause many deaths... Choosing death is only a step away for many people in our society.

How about a church community? Is it always easy to choose life? It's not always simple and easy because the motivation of the people plays a critical role in it. Have you ever heard about a church with people who always complain about not having young families with children and youth, and finally when they had some children and youth they complain about them not behaving like adults? Have you ever heard about a church with people that worry about not having new people, and finally a couple visited the church and no one welcome them? Have you ever heard about a church that was dramatically declined because a group of people allied together and withdrew their support when things didn't go their way? Have you ever heard about a church that was almost split over the various issues from creating a new worship service to whether there should be one trash can or two in the fellowship hall? The one I always remember is the church that has a women's group split over a paper towel in the kitchen whether it should be hung horizontally or vertically. The list goes on and on. If people are driven by their own egos and seeking their own power, even at church people can choose death over life.

If there were a contest of who witnessed the most incidents of people choosing death over life, I think Moses will definitely win the contest. He led people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land and in between his people over and over again chose death

over life. From the moment they were out of slavery they started complaining about everything. They did what God asked them not to and they didn't do what God asked them to do. Finally in today's scripture Moses faced his last day and was making his farewell account asking people to choose between life and death, between prosperity and destruction. They may choose life if they love the LORD God and walk in God's ways, keep God's commandments. The alternative is choosing death if their hearts are turned away, they are not obedient and they worship other gods.

Certainly it will be easy for a church to choose life when it is full of people who choose to love the Lord God and walk in God's ways, keep God's commandments. Bishop Weaver once told us a story about a church in rural Pennsylvania that only had a handful of elderly ladies, barely surviving and about to close its door. But one day the ladies came up with an idea of how they can serve the community. Because the church has a room with a big screen TV and they opened its door to the local youth for a movie night. The kids that didn't have their own space in the community started to gather in the church and gradually their parents got involved in ministry. Later it became a small but an active church again, certainly not a dying church. I read about the church obviously declining but had gifted gardeners. They got together to share their faith and life and started planting flowers around the church. Soon the church became known for its incredible flowerbed. And new people joined in the effort and they went around the town planting flowers in highly visible spots. This very act of planting life became an apt metaphor for what had happened to their church and the church that was dying slowly gained life. I know two United Methodist congregations in Hartford each with unique history and tradition but struggling with decline, moved by the Holy Spirit and formed one congregation, New Covenant United Methodist Church. Two dying churches came together to start a new life. I know very well of a church that collected a truck load of food and money for local food pantry. The same church brings hope to hurting people not only in its community but beyond it by sending a mission team each year. This church has a women's group that provides strong financial and emotional support for the mothers in recovery from homelessness and substance abuse. I know this church very well that the leaders step out to commit themselves to mission and ministry and the

members dedicate themselves to pray for and provide support for the suffering. What church is this? When a church chooses life, it gives life away so others could live.

And now I would like to hear from you even when we do things well, there are always some things that we can do better. Think about this. If Moses could be brought back for an hour to plead with our church, what would he say? Why? What can we do as a church to choose to live, to choose to give life away so others could live?

Discussion topics

If Moses could be brought back for an hour to plead with our church, what would he say? Why?

What would it mean for our church to choose to live, to choose to give life away so others could live?

If a church is full of people that are motivated by the love of God, by the discipleship of Christ and following the lead of the Holy Spirit, it is natural for a church to choose life. When people deliberately choose life over death, choose unity and togetherness over division, when people stay the course over a period of conflict, when people accept others as who they are, when people are proactive to the possible problems and when people process carefully and are responsive not reactive to the controversial issues, a church certainly has life, abundant life and vigorous life, loving life and eternal life. May the Holy Spirit inspire us that we may choose over and over again to become a living and thriving church!