SIXTH SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Non-Binary”* Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Without trivializing the great challenges faced by many people in the world who identify as non-binary, I would like to suggest that their struggle is not too different from the struggle we all face.

Theirs is a struggle for respect and acceptance in a world that insists on strict categories. The world around them that says there is only one choice—male or female. Their struggle is to live in the midst of such stringent categories in a way that is true to who they are. Theirs is a struggle we are all trying to understand and come to terms with.

At Bible Study the other evening, it was pointed out to me that Moses’ words to the people was asking us all to struggle in the much the same way. We, too, are given a choice between two categories of living.

God, through Moses, says that there are only two ways to go forward. We can choose the way of life, or the way of death. We can choose to live and obey the ways God has given us which leads to life, or we can go our own way, which will lead to death.

In the passage we just heard Moses, after many chapters where he has expounded on the many ways God has endured the rebellion and hard-heartedness of the people. He has also spoken to them of the commandments God has given them. Here, once again, Moses once again lays before them what is at stake.

Remember, Moses knows these people. He has led the people through the wilderness for forty years. He has been faithful to the work God gave him all those years ago which led them out of Egypt. Indeed, Moses has done more than just lead the people. He has coaxed them. He has taught them. He has endured their resistance and rebellion many times over. Which is to say that he has been deeply disappointed with them and has been tremendously angry and argued with them over their grumbling and disobedience. He has done everything God has asked him to do and more.

Now Moses and the people he has lived with and cared for, the people he has fought with and loved and worshiped God with—now they have come to the final chapter of their life together.

God has decided that Moses will not enter the Promised Land with them. However, God has also given Moses several more lessons the people need to hear and take to heart before they take leave of one another. The passage we heard is an important part of what God is giving to the Israelites before they cross over the Jordan River into the land flowing with milk and honey.

It is also important to note that the men, women, and children to whom Moses is speaking are not the same people he led out of Egypt. They are the children, grandchildren, and perhaps even the great-grandchildren of the original group. What Moses, and God, knows is that they, too, are like their forebearers. They, too, will be stumble again and again.

So, the words we heard this morning, and in all of Deuteronomy are God’s words, through Moses, to a *new* generation of people. Despite knowing that they, too, will sometimes fail, God still has hope. And so, they are to be the “fresh start” of their people in the new land.

Moses challenges them to be different from their grandparents and their parents even though he knows that the temptation to disobedience will be great because of their own character, and because the land they are entering is populated by many other groups. There will be many people in this new land who worship different gods.

The choice, Moses tells them, life with the God who has been faithful to them, or death following other ways, other gods.

If they choose life, they are also choosing obedience to God and God’s ways. They are choosing to walk with God in their daily life, which will mean being honest and open to God and to each other. It will mean drawing meaning and satisfaction from life with God, and not from the honors or admiration as defined in human terms.

It will mean holding fast to what God has promised rather than the many worldly ways that may satisfy an appetite, for a while, but will not bring about lasting peace and love in the life of the individual, or the life of the community.

The kind of obedience God is asking for and the kind of life that God is offering is a way that can fill our lives with goodness and prosperity. This is an attractive thought, which is often, unfortunately, interpreted to mean material riches and fortunes.

Many people get very distracted by this idea—so much so that it was once thought that wealth or poverty were judgements. If you were wealthy, you must be very pious and good. If you were poor, God must be punishing you for some misdeed. It was even once thought that sickness or injury was a sign of God’s judgement.

It would be helpful if all of life was that simple, if the human heart and spirit was that simple. The bad news is that we are not, which is why it is helpful to remember how Moses began his speech—not in the passage we heard, but in the very beginning of Deuteronomy. Back in the early chapters of Deuteronomy.

After five chapters of recounting the many faults and follies of the people, Moses says this:

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.”* [Deut. 6:4-6]

Obedience is a difficult thing to ask of a human being, especially if we are given a choice. We are *not* binary people who can make one choice and stick to it—even something as important as life itself. We are always on the verge of distraction and departure into our own way. Often, we want to take “short cuts” into or toward what we believe is “the good life.”

The problem is: the short cuts we find for ourselves, the paths we forge for ourselves are often paths that are only focused on our own needs, our own desires. Often, our own desires do not consider anything else but what will bring prosperity or status and position to ourselves and to our own group or tribe.

All others are either wrong, wrong-headed, wrong-hearted, perhaps even evil—people to be denied, their needs ignored, even denigrated.

That is why God has led Moses to declare that what will make the difference is not our blind obedience, but rather an obedience that is grounded in our *love* for God, and God’s love for us.

The love of God is what has endured many, many betrayals even at this point in the story. If you think about it, betrayal, going our own way—this has been the pattern of our lives since the Garden of Eden—and God knows this.

What God also knows is God’s own heart. It is a heart that will be broken again and again, but will never stop having hope and forgiveness for humankind. We know this because here we are, all together, even today.

Much has happened since the Israelites crossed over and began their new life in the Promised Land. We have disappointed God and our own interests many, many times, but God’s mercy, and God’s commitment to us has never waned. Despite our many failings; Despite being nonbinary people living in a very nonbinary world, God continually offers is God’s way of love, the way of reconciliation, the way of peace.

We see this most clearly in the life of Christ who endured the betrayal of one of his own disciples—one who should have had the most insight into the love and mercy of God through his close association with Jesus. In Judas’ choosing something other than faithfulness to the way of love, the earthly life of Jesus was cruelly brought to be extinguished.

Did God’s love end there?

In response to that—which by no means is a rhetorical question—I would like to remind you of a brief chapter in recent history.

It happened in the lifetime of all of us here in this room. It was back on December 7, 1970 during a memorial at the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland. After laying a wreath in memory of the millions of Jews who had been destroyed during the genocide of WWII, then Chancellor of Germany, Willy Brandt, fell to his knees and remained there silently for several minutes.

As a German, he felt the weight of the deep sin that had caused so much death to so many innocent people. He knew something more than a wreath needed to be laid down that day. The pride of a nation needed to humble itself. As the representative of that nation *and* that generation, Willy Brandt felt that responsibility, and that need for humility and mercy, and so he did what he believed could be a gesture toward that hope for his people and the people of Poland, and all of us.

*“I hadn’t planned anything,* [said Brandt] *but left Wilanow Castle, where I was staying, with the feeling that I had to express the specialty of the memorial at the ghetto monument, …*

*“At the abyss of German history and under the burden of the murdered, I did what people do when the language fails.”*

What made Brandt’s gesture especially meaningful is that, during WWII, Willy Brandt was not in Germany. He had not served Hitler even one day of his life. In 1933, Brandt went into exile in Norway and Sweden, and he worked for the resistance *against* Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

The crimes of his nation were not his. His conscience was clear. Yet he did not leave his own people to bear the responsibility on their own. Rather than reject his country, when given the opportunity to do so, Willy Brandt chose to point the way to new life for his country—for all who were guilty and for all who had been persecuted—through his example of compassion.

In 1988, while being interviewed, he said:

*“I think my real success was in having contributed to the fact that in the world in which we live the name of our country, Germany, and the concept of peace can again be mentioned in the same breath.”*

God used Moses to describe the way of life. It is a message that we all still need today even though we are all well aware of our nature. We are non-binary people, mostly incapable of choosing one way or another. Like the ancient Israelites, we stumble, we wander, we go forward, often limping into God’s hope and love for us.

Our good news is that God’s love never fails. We know that because we know that even when it seems to be as good as dead, the love of God rises from the tomb into which we have laid it and returns to lead us forward.

We may choose differently. Thank goodness God always chooses love and compassion.

As we continue our journey with God, I pray we will allow God to nurture the love we have been given. I hope we when we find ourselves feeling hard-hearted toward someone—like the many people among us who identify as nonbinary—or something else, we will allow God’s love to lead us into humility and openness toward others, and toward our God, who offers us life, and who will always choose to love us.

Amen.