

February 13, 2011: CALLED AND ALIVE

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-8; Psalm 119:1-8

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The first time I heard someone speak in Starbuckian, I was showing a visitor around Madison. We'd stopped at one of the local shops for a cup of coffee, where she boldly stepped to the counter and barked off a random stream of words that sounded like, "tall double shot skinny extra hot." What was a meaningless sequence of words got her the cup of coffee she wanted. When it was my turn, the exchange sounded like this: "I'd like a cup of tea, please." Hot or cold? "Hot." What kind? "Earl Gray." Caf or decaf? "Caffeinated, please." What size? "I just want a cup." These are the sizes—12, 16, 20 ounce. "Small." For here or to go? "To go." Room for milk? "No thanks." It was like a courtroom cross-examination.

Since that time, more purchases have taken on the consumer's litany: soup or salad, paper or plastic, for here or to go, organic or conventional, debit or credit? So many choices—do they really want to sell me this? Americans treasure the freedom to make choices, perhaps as the inheritance of the doctrine of free will. Deuteronomy today sets up that culture of choice, with the minor technical detail that it really isn't much of a choice. Moses makes perfectly clear the choice he expects Israel to make.

Time was, the church thought this passage was a treaty, but treaties are imposed and covenants require mutual assent, and that's the whole point of this covenant between God and the people of God—a covenant with "a passion for national unity and common loyalty" (Towner). The story may have been recorded after the Babylonian exile, as an explanation for why the exile happened. Not so much, "You only have yourselves to blame" as, "There are consequences to the choices you make." What I find annoying about pairing this passage with 1 Corinthians today is that Paul says, "Actually, you *do* only have yourself to blame!"

Paul also grinds the axe of unity and common loyalty, but in the church, not the nation. He rags on this fractious church about divvying which leader is more right. With our perspective of 2,000 years of church history, we can recall lots of leaders who claimed to be Spirit-led, but whom history revealed to be crazy or power-hungry or downright heretical. Our Presbyterian polity is based on the premise that, while Christ is Lord of the conscience, God's will can be reliably discerned through faithful community. That may explain our ponderous committee system that takes a sometimes overly precious view of the value of empowering a diversity of voices.

This month, 45 pastors of large Presbyterian churches across the country published a letter inviting the denomination to change the course they believe is headed toward death. They acknowledge the changes they propose could just as easily result in a split as in revitalization. The buzz on the blogs, and the initial response from HQ in Louisville, has been to say that our polity requires theological/ racial/ gender/ economic diversity for a reason, that our SOP utilizes a balance of clergy and lay persons for discernment. None of this is reflected in the make up of the fellowship of 45, who believe they are presenting the PCUSA with Moses' choice: choose *life*.

Jean Vanier, founder of the international movement of L'Arche communities, believes that we all have a "wound of loneliness," stemming from an inborn desire to belong in community, a healthy longing which over time is damaged by the disappointments and hurts of life. From childhood, we try to address this wound in various ways. By exerting control and power. With bids for the esteem and attention of others. With alcohol or drugs. By acquiring possessions. Even by undermining the very community for which we long. The deepest cry of our hearts is, "Do you love me?" but it becomes the cry, "Pay attention to *me*!" We form allegiances within the community by playing "Ain't it awful" (these people are going to hell in a

hand basket) or telling secrets (if you knew how she was raised, you'd think differently). Vanier's work with mentally handicapped people taught him that to deny the wound is to deny God the opportunity to heal. "What we must do," Vanier says, "is walk with it instead of fleeing from it. We cannot accept it until we discover that we are loved by God just as we are, and that the Holy Spirit in a mysterious way, is living at the centre of the wound."<sup>1</sup>

The choice Moses offers Israel is a defining national choice. It's a choice similar to what Egypt is offered today. The choice is so much more than "paper or plastic," more than "king or democracy," more than "dictator or anarchy." This choice, so formative for who Israel would always be, you'd think someone would have recorded the people's decision. It's not. And since it's not, one is left with the distinct impression that the choice for life always remains an option. As if this passage tells of more than a people standing on the verge of God's kept promise, more than an explanation of what just happened in exile. It's as if Deuteronomy's offer stands for all time, to remind us there is always room to start over, to reaffirm our allegiance to God.

I just learned a new term—ecotone. Combining the term "ecology" with the Greek word for "tension," ecotone means the meeting place between two different ecological communities. It's a fertile and life-giving zone. Our spiritual ecotone is the place where our woundedness meets the living God in whom we are healed. Henri Nouwen experienced his ecotone in a L'Arche community caring for a disabled young man named Adam. As Nouwen had his own experience of moving from the "them" of The Disabled to the "you" of Adam, he discovered the "we" of healing. He received that healing gift of "we" when he realized how much he and Adam belonged together. Life with Adam made God's love concrete. God's love, he discovered, was not only "for all creation," but particular toward him. He discovered his identity, not in his limitations and what he was not, but in who God is and who God created him to be.

This is what it means to choose life. If "Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter" (Younger), then life is giving ourselves to what *does* matter. Our culture reveres purposeful behavior, but the purposes are so often false: accomplishing, acquiring, accelerating, expanding. The purposes to which God calls us are simpler: presence, being, love, including. Choose life! Choose what matters. "Enjoy simple things. Play with children. Laugh often, long, and loud. Cry when it is time to cry. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others. . . . Turn off the television. Get together with friends. Invite a stranger to lunch or dinner. Clean out a drawer. Read a book of poetry. Quit doing what is not worth your time. Do something so someone else will not have to. Give money to a cause you care about. Stop arguing. Apologize to someone, even if it was mostly his fault. Forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it. Have patience. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth. Figure out what you hope for and live with that hope." (Younger) Give thanks where it's due. Point to God whenever you can. Choose life! It is more practical and concrete than you think.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Vanier, quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year A Voll*, Roger Gench, p. 352. All parenthetical authors are from this resource.