

“Life is Filled with Some Basic Choices”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 12, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 19:1-8 (VU#838, part one)

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Jacob Neusner is one of the most highly regarded Jewish scholars of the 20th century. The University of South Florida tapped him to be the lead editor in a series of publications known as the *South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism*.

Neusner himself authored one of the books in that series, printed almost a quarter century ago, entitled *The Judaism the Rabbis Take for Granted*. The book is a philosophical and theological rendering of the variety of ways in which Judaism was experienced and recorded in the earliest centuries of the faith, and he comes to the conclusion that it is inappropriate to suggest there is a common Judaism that is linked by tradition, practices, beliefs, cultural activity and so on, but one must say that there are many Judaisms on the world stage.

He begins the book by seeking to define what a religion is – in this case, defining Judaism. “We define a religion not only in terms of its social order – the way of life, worldview, and theory of the social entity of people who believe certain things and consequently form a community that does things in one way, rather than some other – but in terms of its abstract system of belief and behaviour.

Taking that basic division of religious reality – practice and belief, actions and ideas, what we do and what we say is important and lies behind what we do – it is difficult, argues Neusner, to see a consistency in all ways that Judaism was taught, lived, believed and shared.

Now that can be a fairly disappointing way to start any book, and for one who wants to get at what is the essence of the basic Old Testament teachings, and in particular the passage read earlier from Deuteronomy, what am I left with?

Well, there may be a variety of ways that people express their Jewish faith, just as there are many examples of the ways that Christians gather and share their faith, but there are some basics that underlie all expressions of the faith, whatever we are considering. Neusner mentions the prohibition of eating pork, male circumcision, and belief in one God as being among a large number of teachings and practices that are universal within Judaism.

Even so, with all of the common beliefs, we cannot define the faith by listing what is held in common, for there are nuances of belief and practice that create the variety of expressions of Judaism (the many “Judaisms”) that the world knows.

So what are some of the other basics of the faith that need to be uplifted, and maybe some of them found their way into the Christian tradition? Surely Deuteronomy 30:15-20 is among them: “See I have set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.”

So this passage begins. God sets before us a choice between life and death, between prosperity and adversity. This is not about some modern prosperity gospel that guarantees wealth to all believers. No, it is about the fact that God gives us the opportunity to affirm life, and to nurture growth, and we can take that opportunity, or we can squander it.

That is the nature of the very beginning of the biblical witness – the story of Adam and Eve and the Tree of Life is a story where they seek all of the answers to life without experiencing the realities of life. Eden is not so much about original sin as it is about original laziness.

The first created ones wanted to know what life is all about and have all of the answers they needed ***without going through the process of living their lives***. They wanted to skip an essential step to self-awareness before God. Surely that is the essential quality of the faith –Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and others. We have choices to face, and our faithful response is to choose life.

Let me share a story that brings this principle clearly into focus:

Mark was walking home from school one day when he noticed a student in front of him had tripped and dropped all of the books he was carrying, along with two sweaters, a baseball hat, a glove, and a small CD player. Mark knelt down and helped the fellow pick up all of his belongings, and since they were heading in the same direction, he helped him carry things to his house.

As they walked, he discovered the fellow’s name was Bruce, that he loved video games, baseball, and history, but he was not doing so well in his other subjects, and he had just broken up with his girlfriend. When they got to Bruce’s house, Mark was invited in for a pop and they watched some television. The rest of the afternoon passed with small talk and a few laughs, and then Mark went home.

They continued to see each other now and again at school, occasionally having lunch together. When senior year came, Bruce asked Mark if they could talk about three weeks before the end of the final semester. Bruce reminded Mark of the first day they met a few years back.

“Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so much stuff from school that day?” Bruce asked. “You see, I cleaned out my locker because I did not want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away some of my mother’s sleeping pills, and I was going home to commit suicide. But after we spent some time together I realized that if I had, I would have missed that time and so many others that might follow. So, you see, Mark, when you picked up my books for me that day, you did a lot more. You saved my life.”

Life indeed is made up of some basic choices, but we never know how we can impact others with those choices.

Steven Covey wrote a book some years ago about the ***Seven Habits of Highly Effective People***. A sequel to that book offered stories from people who applied those principles to their lives, and the ways that the principles sparked opportunities and changes that were surprising even to those who lived those experiences.

One story was about a motorcycle dealer owner whose life came crashing down after one horrific incident. In his words:

“I woke up in the hospital one day with my life in ruins. My wife told me there had been a car accident. I had been drinking at a party with my friend Frank. He was with me when I wrecked the car. Frank was killed.”

He was charged with manslaughter, and the story he tells speaks about his journey through Alcoholics Anonymous and eventually in prison for 10 years on a plea deal, and the struggles within the jail time. Somehow his marriage survived, but it was not easy for either he or his wife. He found ways to be busy in prison – became the cleaner for the main offices, and established programs for children of prisoners who came to visit.

He saw so many children bored and sitting by themselves when their mothers and other relatives came to visit prisoners, so he helped to establish a library with children’s books. He and his wife arranged payment for the bookshelves, and the library expanded to include Spanish books as well.

His road to recovery and new life remains long, but he always remembered two of the principles of Covey’s book—keep your eye on the ultimate goal, and make first things first.

Deuteronomy is the second giving of the law – a revision, expansion, clarification, re-understanding of the original lawgiving. Call it what you will. Deuteronomy is saying again truths that were said in earlier books of the Bible, notably Exodus, in a way that we might be ready to hear it.

God will give us challenges, uncertainties, blessings and curses. We are called to choose life, and to move forward each new day.

That is a basic choice we all have been invited to make.