

Reflection—Cathy Dempsey—2/12/2017

Thirty-some years ago, I heard this story about one of the priests from the Benedictine Monastery in Columbia, Missouri. I wasn't present when this incident took place, but it certainly sounded to be in keeping with the character of this particular priest.

Fr. Lucien was giving a talk to an interdenominational group of Christians. There were Catholics, Protestants, Southern Baptists, Evangelicals. Fr. Lucien walked up to the podium, held up his Bible, and said: "This is not the Word of God." Very uncomfortable silence among the audience. Fr. Lucien again held up his Bible and said: "This is not the Word of God." Lots of squirming in chairs in the audience while people were deciding whether to get up and walk out or rush the stage and physically remove Fr. Lucien from the room. One last time Fr. Lucien held up the Bible and said, "This is not the Word of God... until it comes to life in our hearts and minds." Audible sighs of relief from all around the room.

Fr. Lucien's point, I think, was a good one—the Bible is nothing more than a collection of words on paper, unless we read the Word with faith and try to bring it to life by the way we live every day, and I think that is part of the message we hear in our Gospel passage today from Matthew, and in our first reading, from the Book of Sirach.

So how do we do that? How do we bring the Word of God to life every day? Our reading from Sirach tells us "If you choose, you can keep the commandments." We each make hundreds of choices every day, and those choices can either bring God's life and love into the world, or not so much. God has given us free will—we have the freedom to choose to love God and to love one another. In giving us free will, God took a big risk, if you will. God didn't want a

bunch of robots running around doing God's will just because we had to. God loved us into creation, and wanted us to love Him in return, but if we didn't have any choice in the matter, that wouldn't really be love, would it? So God kind of held Her breath, and said, "Okay, people, you get to choose." Sirach goes on to say: "There are set before you fire and water; to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand. Before you are life and death; whichever you choose will be given to you."

Making the right, life-giving, God-loving choices isn't always easy. It isn't always easy to know what the right, loving choice is. Sometimes it's easy—if any one of us saw someone walking in front of us on the sidewalk drop a twenty-dollar bill, most all of us would immediately return it to the person without even thinking about it; wouldn't even consider keeping it. Other choices, like when we're choosing between two good things, choosing between good and better, aren't at all easy. How much of my time do I spend on my job vs. how much do I spend with my family? How much of my money do I donate to charity vs. how much do I save for retirement vs. how much do I spend on my family's current needs? What charities should I donate to? Where should I volunteer my time? Who do I vote for? What public policy issues are most important for me to support and what do I do and say to whom in support of those causes? Those are never easy choices.

Jesus gives us some clues about the difficulty of making good choices in the words from today's Gospel passage from Matthew. The passage we heard a few minutes ago started with Matthew 5:20, but I want to back up a few verses to verse 17, where Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Part of what we did hear in the passage just now were examples of what Jesus means by

fulfilling the law: We don't just need to avoid killing others, but even getting angry with them; we don't need to avoid actual physical adultery, but also engaging in lustful thoughts toward someone who belongs to someone else.

Fulfilling the law, bringing the Word of God to life every day is a lot more challenging than reading a set of black-and-white rules and just following those. Richard Rohr says that transformation requires a kind of stable tripod of 3 things: Scripture, tradition, and experience. We need to be deeply rooted and engaged in all three, and bring a love for and study of the Scripture and of our tradition (the history of the spiritual journey of those who have gone before us), as well as a recognition of and valuing of our own personal life experiences into our prayer, into our relationship with God, when we pray for discernment and good judgment in deciding what to do, what to say, and how to live.

There was a time, centuries ago, when many good Christians believed that slavery was allowed, even supported, by the Bible. As time went by, though, and Christians studied the Bible, listened and learned from their spiritual tradition, and listened and learned from their own experiences, they realized that was never what the Bible meant. Christians have come to realize that God intended people of all races to be equal, and that God does not want anyone to own another human being. But this understanding of God's law evolved and grew slowly, over a long period of time.

What I'm trying to say is that fulfilling the law is not easy; we don't always know for sure if we're doing the right thing. But we need to stay engaged in the process—read, study, and

pray the Scriptures; read, study, and pray our history and tradition as God's people; and "read, study, and pray" our individual experiences and the experiences of others.

(Close with prayer by Thomas Merton on discernment).