

Epiphany 6A 2-16-20
Rev'd Jennifer Phillips

St. John's Church
Sirach 15:15-20; 1 Cor.3:1-9; Matt.5:21-37

If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. God has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given. (Sirach)

Welcome to evolution Sunday. The Clergy Letter Project started over a decade ago to encourage congregations and their leaders of many denominations each Spring to speak to the perfect possibility of being people of both faith and science, and by this combination, putting humane and godly values and ideals to work with the tools of good science to improve the world and the human family. Ideas of evolution and selective adaptation need not be seen as at war with the Bible. Not is Scripture a blueprint or a crystal ball for mapping history, or packet of prescriptions for every decision and way of analyzing our world. It's God-breathed and inspiring, perplexing and sometimes-contradictory, a compendium of stories and poetry, philosophies, remembrances, political utterances, testaments of hope, and gathered wisdom that together points to the revelation of the divine in history, in the development of a people of faith, and among us in the divine and enfleshed and human person Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ; and in a Holy Spirit outpoured on us through time and giving an animating spirit to everything that breathes. And the second volume of revelation, the created universe, the kosmos: it also shows the development of humankind in our diversity, the concrete and actual human lives of a series of memorable prophets and leaders, and of Jesus and his friends and those who followed after, the changing face of the natural world in its intricate ecosystems, and the strength and persistence of life on our planet and the reaching of knowledge described to us most succinctly in the language of mathematics but also through the poetics of our various human languages. God speaks to us through faith and science. All human thought and speaking is a midrash - that lovely Hebrew word that means an interpretation of the text - study of the world and its potential meanings - and not just for fun and delight; for acting well and being good and doing right through what the son of Sirach (also a Jewish man named Jesus (or Y'shua, Joshua), though about 200 years before Jesus of Nazareth) called "a matter of your own choice".

It is breathtaking - what Sirach says in the few lines we heard today from his short book collected in the Jewish *apocrypha*- books around the edges of the Jewish Bible- and the thought echoes Deuteronomy, that much older volume in Scripture. to act faithfully is a matter of your own God-given free choice. Fire and water lay before you: which will you reach for. Bear in mind we human beings need both, and can be destroyed by either! Before each of

us are life and death. We will experience both, each in its moment - it is up to us to use our choice to support life and then to accept death when it is appropriate. This is a shocking power resting in our hands. We are given a sword of great power with this choice, often more power than we realize. But often, of course, the choosing we do doesn't seem like that of the soldier on the battlefield; much of it feels like the choosing of the chef in the supermarket, the skier on the mountaintop, the teacher planning the curriculum, the farmer maintaining her fields fruitfully, the doctor selecting the least damaging and most effective treatment for a dangerous disease. Daily we make our many tiny decisions feeling them to be inconsequential except to us and our closest ones. But put together over time, they have power to take down forests, dry up rivers, poison populations, and kill others and ourselves and much of the life around us.

It is difficult, really difficult, to keep trying to choose and to do good, right, and well. As Jesus points out in that rabbinic style of "putting a fence around the law: setting even more stringent side-rules to keep people from inadvertently breaking a major commandment - you've heard it said in the past/but I say to you! Don't even start down the slippery slope that begins with not paying attention to your small behaviors - like being mad at your relatives. Don't take the easy road when your marriage gets rocky. Don't let anger bubble up into out-of-control violence.

So for us. Even seemingly simple choices are fraught with complexity. Tiny local decisions have wide consequences we may or may not be able to foresee: use coated paper coffee cups or ceramic - made of what resources, with what energy, what human capital, what waste products, what maintenance needed, what durability, what economic consequences? Medical interventions: what costs and to whom, what resources diverted from others to help this one, what risks and benefits, what quality of life aspects for patient and community? A vote for a choice of leader: what policies will likely follow, which may be achievable not just desirable, what compromise between imperfect candidates, what hierarchy of values in making our choice, what's best for me and what for the nation or the world? How far is my righteous anger at bad behavior useful and when does it slide into hatred and the failure of love? Pay great attention to your small choices, Jesus says, so you don't crash and burn on the big ones.

And there are some large choices before us collectively - as nations and a human race that we cannot let disappear behind the forest of tiny personal choices we face. We have less than a decade left in which it will be possible to change the curve of our carbon emissions worldwide sufficiently to head off a global climate collapse that is already begun. There is remarkable scientific consensus about this necessity and approximate timeline. I suspect

that those of us who are Boomers, give or take a generation, are like the fabled frogs in the boiling pot, not noticing the water is getting warmer by degrees and we are being boiled with it. Lucky for us, it seems the tadpoles in our pond have figured this out and are shouting and striking about turning the heat down, and some folks are listening. Loud young women in Congress are shouting about a Green New Deal. Loud young climate activists are warning that building our nations' economies by expanding natural gas and oil fracking and coal-fired energy development and internal combustion engines on land, sea, and air are us trying to extinguish fire with buckets of gasoline. Alas this is a more literal than figurative description; as is the pot of boiling frogs. There are a ton of issues and priorities I care about, but it is becoming clear that if this doesn't move to the head of the line, none of the rest will matter. As Greta Thunberg lucidly puts it: "Our house is on fire. Some panic is needed."

This is a thought about how we go from the personal to the collective: As an individual I care about growing things. I grew up in New York woodlands. I care about trees. My Kuder preference test (which you'll only remember if you are a Boomer - poking a pin through boxes on many overlaying sheets of either/or questions to outline a likely career path) - mine said I should be either a forester or a social worker - clergy not being an option for girls in the 60s. So- trees: noticing them, walking among them, planting them, studying them, reading about them; I do this. And in my little rectory amid a tiny remnant of woodland that grew from former farmland on now depleted and stony soil, I see trees in trouble. Limbs falling in numbers, needles dropping and not regrowing, chancres on trunks, more insect infestations, spots on leaves, root-rot, thinning canopies. But these are just a few rather sad trees left from land-clearing development. I drive around Massachusetts and see - some places more and some a bit less, but everywhere - native trees not flourishing. And going back to New York, the forests look better but not as good as they used to. New Mexico where I lived for several years - just about the entire Carson National forest of piñon trees is dead as a doornail. Not just temporarily burned or set back by a wave of pests, but gone with no seedlings following. Mountainsides full of aspens and spruce are dying wholesale. The proximate causes for species sickness may be a certain invasive bug; a more-severe-than-usual cyclone, tornado, or hurricane; a passing drought or flood; a more severe-than-usual fire - but the large-scale change is in the *climate*, the whole pattern of winds and moisture and temperature that affects the well-being of every living thing; the very quality of the air everything living breathes. The trees are an indicator for us.

This won't be solved by planting a million new trees, though trees are helpful. As I think you know, this will take major and rapid change in the

way we eat, travel, heat and cool ourselves, and in what our expectations will be for how much stuff we buy and throw away; in our ability to first envision and then accomplish a future that is not based on constant growth but on shrinkage of lifestyle and moving into a circular economy that shrinks or eliminates waste, reduces overall consumption, keeps reusing materials, renews natural systems, and uses renewable energy. Right now none of this is a first priority in America.

As Christians we start from the perspective that all this around us belongs to God, not to us, and we are *entrusted* to be its stewards and answerable to God for our job performance in caring for it. We are created as parts of a community, and as people of faith, we are consecrated to the work of caring for each other and the environment on which we depend for all our lives. In the 21st century we can't overlook for a moment the reality that ours is a global community on a small world, of grand but limited resource. Planetary life is resilient and adaptable but not indestructible or limitless. We can't afford leaders who think we're still in the age of Manifest Destiny and expanding into an infinite Wild West. Those were myths in the last centuries; for awhile they motivated human effort; now they are profane lies that will kill us.

And if anyone thinks that such matters are political and have nothing to do with religion (I heard that a lot growing up!)- just how do they imagine we are to actually love our neighbors as ourselves, do justice, and love kindness, and walk in humility with our God if we disregard planetary well-being, and our role as stewards and vineyard-workers in God's creation? Good intention counts for little without right action. It's not enough not to murder- says Jesus - put away your rage at each other. Don't just change your heart, change your way of life. Change the small choices while you can, so you'll be ready for the big ones.

As people of faith, we understand that we are co-laborers, we are not in the work of the world alone. God labors with us - or we with God- and thus the resilience of life and the imagination and inventiveness we are given! But God does not say to us: go into the world and have a good time and do as you like because I am the doting parent with the deep purse who will sweep in behind your catastrophes and fix everything. God says rather: I love you. I set before you life and death. Choose wisely and prudentially. Choose responsibly. Choose lovingly. Choose in ways that foster life. You are heirs of eternal life, but first of all - serve life here and now.

