



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany February 16, 2014

“It is in Your Hands”

(Deut. 30:19-20)

Rev. David K. Groth

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days” (Deut. 30:19-20).

Collect of the Day

O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequence of our sin may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

When she received the Nobel Prize for Literature, American author Toni Morrison began her acceptance remarks with a story. It's a wonderful story. It's a story about an old woman. "Blind but wise, the daughter of slaves, black, American, who lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away. . . One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask one question. They stand before her, and one of them says, 'Old Woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead?' She does not answer and the question is repeated. 'Is the bird I am holding living or dead?' Still she does not answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands . . . The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter. Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. 'I don't know,' she says. 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.'"

Toni Morrison continued: "Her answer can be taken to mean: if it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility."

It is in your hands . . . it is your decision . . . your

responsibility. It . . . life . . . the life of the community . . . the life of the nation . . . the life of this church . . . your one and only life . . . is in your hands.

Isn't that essentially what Moses is telling the people of Israel? The Lord brought the people up out of Egypt. For forty years now they've been living as nomads in the vast wilderness of Sinai, wandering from place to place, oasis to oasis. But now, they are finally about to cross over into the Promised Land. They can see it; it's just on the other side of the Jordan River. There's high anxiety in the air, and fear, excitement. Moses is old now. He isn't going across. His time has come. And so he has just one last chance to teach them, one last chance sum everything up and give a little advice, and admonish them to do right. He reminds them how God brought them up out of Egypt and what God did to Pharaoh and his army. He reminds them how, in the desert, their clothes and sandals did not wear out because of God's providential care for his people. He implores them to be faithful to the Lord. And at the very end, he pulls out all the stops and says: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers."

You might find yourself doing something like that when you drop your dear one off at college for the freshman year. You stuff the vehicle full. You pull up as close as you can to the dorm. It's always hot, the elevator always in use, and her room at least three, four stories up. You help her get settled in, make her bed for her, and then it comes time to leave. What do you say? How do you condense all the vital survival information you've accumulated over the years . . . in the school of hard knocks . . . how do you condense all that and deliver it one last time. "Be careful" you say. "This is not Watertown. This is downtown St. Louis." "Be good" you say. "No binge drinking and stay away from the punch

at the parties. Eat balanced meals. Keep your room neat. Wear your bicycle helmet. Find a church; remember I gave you the list. Try them out.” Eye balls start rolling, and your wife tugs at the elbow and says, “It’s ok David, and it’s time to go home now.” And the first thirty miles in the car are quiet and tearful. It’s in her hands now.

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. The decisions, the responsibilities, the life . . . it is in your hands.

We do have more control over our lives than we sometimes care to admit. We have a myriad of choices to make every single day. God has given us spine-tingling freedom . . . to keep his laws or to reject them, to be faithful to him or rebel against him, to make the world a better place, or just sort of pass through. Your life is in your hands, not someone else’s. You have choices to make, lots and lots of choices, and how you make them will to a great extent make up the substance of your life. And the responsibility is yours alone. It’s in your hands.

In Thursday’s newspaper there was an article in the newspaper about the American athletes not performing up to expectations in Sochi. Matthew Futterman writes, “They’ve lost while wearing skis, skates and snowboards. They’ve put their country in a deep hole in the medal race and allowed the likes of Norway and the Netherlands to nibble on them like slabs of pickled herring. But despite their lack of trips to the podium, American Olympians are running a healthy surplus in another area: the sheer number of excuses being made . . . Melting snow! Lousy refs! Irrational judges!” (WSJ, Feb. 13). In Friday’s newspaper there’s an article about the high tech suits designed for the American speed skaters which received a lot of press before the Olympics, and are now being eyed with some suspicion as the cause for their poor performance. Surely it’s not just American athletes. You and I know it’s human nature. The fault usually lies outside of ourselves, right? And we are just the hard working, blameless victims of another’s

misbehaviour or negligence. You know, you can always make excuses, but in the end, your life, how you live it, is still in your hands.

Now, there are some choices we cannot make, some responsibility that is not ours. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn. 15:16). Paul wrote, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ but by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). “You are a *chosen* people” Peter writes (1 Pet. 2:9) . . . and not the ones who did the choosing. “This is love”, wrote John, “Not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10).

So the big choice belongs to God. But then there follows a myriad of smaller decisions that do rest in your hands, daily choices through which you become or don’t become the person God wants you to be. Are you going to spend your free time staring miserably into a screen, or are you going to volunteer in the community? Are you going to take the kids to Disney for a week, or perhaps with the same money give them several years worth of Christian education? Are you going to take the time to vote, or stay home that day? Are you going to just drop the kids off for Sunday School, or will you come in and study God’s Word with us? Are you going to commit your life to another “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health” or will you just sort of gradually move in and see how it goes? Your life is in your hands.

This church is in your hands . . . it’s health and welfare. It’s not in my hands. It’s not my church. I don’t own it. I’m certainly not washing my hands of it. Nor can I fix the financial problem we are in. Not alone. My wife and I can do our part. But there’s also a part that’s only in your hands.

Sometimes I think we assume someone will step up to the plate, someone with a big bank account and for whom it won’t hurt too much to write out a big check. And there are congregations that operate that way. Good Shepherd isn’t one of them. We have folks who are exceedingly generous, but I suspect we also have folks who are exceedingly tight. Their savings and income have grown indisputably; their giving has remained flat.

This church is like that bird in Morrison's story. Remember how Morrison interpreted her own parable? "If the bird is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it [either willfully or by neglect]. Whether it is to stay alive is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility."

It's in your hands. So much is in your hands. It's positively frightening how much responsibility God entrusts into our hands. What a good thing it is then that we are in his hands . . . that he has taken responsibility for us. He takes on our sin as if it's his own . . . as if we didn't even do it; he did. He, the ultimate innocent victim; "he who knew no sin became sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). That is, all his choices, all his decisions were obedient and God pleasing, yet he willingly paid the penalty for our disobedient choices. He wraps us up in his own cloak of righteousness as if it belonged to us all along. Paul wrote, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). And with that righteousness comes eternal life. "I give my sheep eternal life" Jesus said, "and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:28). We are in his hands, and that is right where we want to be.

Just like Moses, Jesus too had some last words for his followers. "Do not let your hearts be troubled" he said. "Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. . . I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (Jn 14:1-4).

God has entrusted so much into our hands, and we can be careless and disobedient with all of it. Therefore he does not entrust the salvation of our souls into our hands. There's simply too much at stake. That he takes care of himself.

As you know, a little over a week ago, one of our members Ruth Dede died in a car accident. Years before

that, anticipating her death, she wrote a little testimony of faith. Like Moses, she wanted one last chance to impart a few words to her family. First, she tells them what she knows. “I, Ruth Dede, confess joyously that Jesus is my Savior and that I have placed all my hope and faith in Him. His death and resurrection have given my life constant meaning and make my death a peaceful passage to eternal life in heaven . . . I want my family and friends to know, in the words of St. Paul, that for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Next, she tells them what she wants. “I ask my family . . . never to forget the instruction of Christ to be faithful until death. Please learn all you can about God and how He sent His Son to die in our place. In your life let it be obvious you are God’s child and saved alone by grace and not by good works. Share God’s word of salvation in Christ with everyone at home and in every way you can wherever you go in this world.” Finally she closes with a little benediction. “May God grant you peace, love, and strength as He guides you through life.” A beautiful, beautiful little confession of faith!

You can do that too, you know, and leave behind a testimony of faith for your family. Ruth knew the treasure of the Gospel was in her hands and she wanted to pass it on one last time.

God has entrusted much also to your hands. More importantly, you are in his hands, and those are good and gracious hands. Amen.

