

From the Book of Deuteronomy: Moses said, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

We begin this morning with a traditional Jewish toast. L’ Chaim. To life! It is tucked away neatly in Moses’ last sermon, his farewell address to his people before they cross over into the Promised Land. I can imagine him before them, raising his hand at the Jordan River in celebration, just as he had once raised it at the Red Sea—then in escape, this time in remembrance and celebration. “I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” L’ Chaim. To life.

I suspect this is something that the children of Waban know well, a Jewish toast at Bar Mitzvahs. The search committee warned me that our children would ask at least once (but probably more) to convert to Judaism. Between the gifts of Hanukkah and revelry of Bar Mitzvahs, the children of Waban would gladly give away two members of the Trinity in exchange for those gifts.

With that in mind, I want to suggest to you an image: Deuteronomy is the Bible’s great Bar Mitzvah. God’s people are welcomed after years of instruction and wandering and into a land where they can be God’s own people. This is the story of their transition. From Egypt to the Promised Land. From totalitarianism to self-determination. From slavery to freedom. You are adults now. Choose whom you will serve, Moses says. Choose life, raising his glass. L’ Chaim.

If we hear his words today like a toast to his people and their future, we might think of the Ten Commandments as the lasting token, the take-home gift. They are the picture framed and kept on a desk or hung on a wall, remembered every day as a keepsake of what it means to have become God’s people.

This is also true in our own tradition. If you have visited colonial-era Episcopal churches, you have seen how they painted the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed on the wall behind the holy table, both of which children were taught and expected to memorize before

they could be confirmed. And there they remained, a reminder of how such holy words once confirmed us as God's people, and how they still remind us of that spiritual union. They are the picture hung on the wall.

I wonder, if we opened it up, how many of the commandments you could name. Since we don't have them painted on the East Wall, it might be interesting. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not commit murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

But today, I want to offer you a different perspective on them, and it is this: the Ten Commandments were once given as a bar mitzvah toast, a Confirmation prayer, to prepare people for the life that lay ahead. They are a road map on the way from slavery to freedom. They are a take-home reminder of God's great work of liberation.

So today, as you think back to the Ten Commandments and how we have learned them and carried them with us, I want you to say them in a way that celebrates God's work of liberation. Instead of "Thou shalt not," try

saying, "now you don't have to any more." That is a toast. That is a map to freedom. That is a take-home reminder of God's work of liberation. And it occurs to me that may also a good way for us to remember how they were an expression of faith that the Hebrew People learned on their way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Here is what I mean:

"You don't have to have any other gods before me." Back in Egypt, you did. Egyptian gods were everywhere and you couldn't do anything about it, but not any more. Now you don't have to have any other gods before me.

"You don't have to take my name in vain." Back in Egypt you did and especially they did. I was a by-word among the nations, but no more. You don't have to take my name in vain, because I am the Lord your God.

You don't have to profane the Sabbath. Back in Egypt you worked on their schedule, but now you can keep it holy. You can honor your parents. You can't be sold away from them anymore, or they from you. No one can

make you kill or steal. You don't have to commit adultery. Back in Egypt they called you property, and you remember what that meant, but no more. You don't have to approach life that way any more. Moses raised a glass and said to them all of this. Choose life. L' Chaim.

You remember that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus often is portrayed as a new Moses of sorts. As the Messiah, he now acts on behalf of all the world the way that Moses once acted on behalf of the people of Israel. He gives living water in the deserts of life. He is the manna from above. Like Moses on Sinai, he intercedes and teaches. And while this is true in all of the Gospels, this is especially true in Matthew's gospel.

In Matthew, Jesus is born into a world where Herod is killing all the young children, just like the case when Moses was born. Mary and Joseph take the young Jesus and hide him in order to protect him from that wrath, just like Moses' parents did for him. And just to make the point complete, Matthew tells us that Joseph took his young family to Egypt to protect them, only later

bringing them back to Israel. And when Jesus begins his teaching, what you and I call the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew underscores how Jesus went up on a mountain and began to teach them.

For that reason, I think that we are able to hear these words from the gospel today—some of them that are very difficult and painful for many Christians—as words of deliverance. And to be sure, they are words of liberation. You don't have to spend your life hating and lying and divorcing and remarrying in order to get by. You don't have to do any of that anymore. From now on you are free to love.

And it is here that I think that the image of a Bar Mitzvah or Confirmation is so important. Those, of course, are times that mark for us the responsibility and conscientiousness of mature faith. Freedom and liberation are met with responsibility and duty. Life in the Promised Land isn't utopia; rather, it is a place where can grow up into the fullness of Christ, of all that God has created us to be.

Every time we read from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, someone comes up to me afterward and says, "Do you think Jesus really meant that... or was it just hyperbole? Was he exaggerating? Because I have," and there you can fill in the blank. I remember a friend of ours. She had one of those disastrous first marriages. They were young and naïve and they realized it before they had children. She talked to us about going back to church. We helped her to find churches in Washington where she could start putting back together the pieces of her life. And she went. It was the first time she had been in a church since the day she got married. And this was the gospel reading. And she was devastated. She wondered if this wasn't God's way of telling her not to bother coming back. And I know she wasn't the first person to feel that way. I have heard it too many times.

The opposite of that, it seems to me, was a comment I heard at a Bar Mitzvah. His family was giving speeches and someone, his mother I think, said how proud of him she was, and how hard he had worked, and now... he

was a man and could do whatever he wanted. And I saw the rabbi take a big sip of Manischewitz.

All of life matters, our gospel says today, our anger and our love and our disappointment and those people we carry with us in life, even to the altar. And not growing up into the full stature of Christ means missing out on what is important in life. And not allowing room for grace will make you crazy.

Anger and love and honesty are all well known to us, I think. But I am tripped up by Jesus' words that if we are presenting our gift at the altar and then remember that someone has something against us we should leave, be reconciled, then return. For most of life, I understood this to be about having something against someone, but at some point I realized this was about someone having something against you. And I began to imagine taking this literally, if I went out looking for everyone who had something against me. At the peace, walking up and down the aisles of the church and asking, do you have something against me? Week after week, do you have

something against me? After a while, you would say, no but I am starting to!

I suspect that is a reminder of what it means to carry other people's hate and disappointment with us, too. Perhaps what Jesus has in mind here, what it means to grow up into the full stature of Christ, to grow up and learn to live no longer in the fear of slavery but in the grace and liberty and responsibility of the Promised Land, it means seeing the interconnectedness of it all. We cannot compartmentalize the sin or the grace. And growing up also recognizes where grace is essential both for ourselves and for the many others that we carry to the altar with us.

All of life matters, our gospel says: our anger and our love and our disappointment and those people we carry with us in life, even to the altar. Pretending that any one thing or any person is outside the realm of God's redemption or of our intention, is to miss out on God's call of forgiveness and grace and our response to it.

You don't have to remain caught in a world of hate and lust and divorce and worrying about disappointment that others project onto you. You don't have to carry the weight of that forever. From now on, you are free to love. I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity, Jesus says. Choose life so that you may live.