

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Feb 19th 2015

Today's readings remind us of the power of our choices. Moses begins the passage in Deuteronomy with a stark and dramatic choice – a fork in the road in which one path leads to life and prosperity, the other to death and gloom – but the reality of making that choice is more subtle. Choosing the good path means doing things every day that may seem ordinary: obeying, loving, walking, and keeping. Yet these ordinary practices lead to living, growing, and even occupying a place of blessing and security.

This past week I had the pleasure of lunching with two brothers who have long been a source of inspiration and encouragement on my own spiritual journey. Their good humor, joyful spirit, and good examples of the faithful life remind me that ordinary virtues produce extraordinary goodness, which radiates through human relationships. Practicing good choices affirms the value of love and the joy of being loved, which in turn empowers more good choices. And we also avoid so many pains and afflictions that the opposite choices deliver.

With practice and encouragement, good choices also tend to become a part of our lives, allowing us to move more easily around potential entanglements. Have you ever watched a sea lion swim? Such effortless movement demonstrates confident power under control, which can change direction whenever an obstacle appears but continue enjoying the journey. This is a powerful image – but it is not an easy one to emulate for one born with arms and legs, not fins and flippers, and who is sometimes scared of the water.

Even when we know these truths about good choices, sometimes we do not obey, love, walk, and keep. The Gospel today reminds us that following Jesus involves a daily practice of denial of self. The school of holiness in which all Christians are enrolled sometimes requires hard lessons. Sometimes we even want to run away from school. But the lessons keep coming our way. Thanks be to God that in His great mercy, we are not abandoned when we make a wrong turn. He comes to find us.

And God also sends companions to encourage us. The Psalmist recognized the power and peril of companionship. I recently read a quotation attributed to George Washington: “Associate with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation: for ‘tis better to be alone than in bad company.” While reputation may also motivate one toward good companionship, the Psalmist suggests even more is at stake. Environmental forces, including the company we keep, can either enhance our vitality or kill it. But of course, we have a role in shaping that environment, for ourselves and others. Let us pray to the Lord that we might choose well in obeying, loving, walking, and keeping, and that we may also choose to be grateful for His mercy in drawing us toward the path of Life. And may we find joy along the way, which is the fuel we need for the journey. Thanks be to God.

