

Problem: How do I live within the Kingdom of Heaven (Beloved Community)?

-When I lived and worked in Glacier National Park for a summer during college, during my time off from working at the T-shirt Shop connected with the gas station I would love to go to the Post Office. It was, in many ways, because of the wonderful mail that I received: care packages from my mom, letters from college friends spending the summer in other cool places, and little notes from friends. But maybe an even bigger reason why I enjoyed going to the West Glacier Post Office was because of my friend Joe who worked there. Joe was a member of the *Crow Nation*, or *Absarokee* as he most commonly called it. He was probably in his mid 30's, a very slender build, smooth dark hair tied in a ponytail, and a smile you just don't forget. He and I met after I received a care package of my mom's cookies (which I HAD to open right away in the post office). He commented how good the cookies smelled and that he could feel my mother and the love she has for me through the package. After sharing a cookie and conversation with Joe, I returned the next day to retrieve my mail saying to him: "Howdy stranger!" to which he replied: "No, No! Howdy brother! Come once you are a stranger and guest. Come twice you are a brother." From that point on for the rest of the summer, every time we greeted one another, it was always with a high-five and saying "howdy brother!"

-During that same summer, a good friend of mine went hiking in the mountains around Ketchum, Idaho and slipped falling to his death. I remember coming into the post office devastated and instead of saying "howdy brother!" Joe said: "What's wrong brother?" After tearfully telling him what had happened, he, with tears in his own eyes, said to come back to the post office after work. Upon returning later, I saw Joe standing in the back of the building, holding some pieces of dried grass and flowers. I stood next to him as he lit this bouquet on fire and began to sing a native mourning song. It was one of the most comforting experiences I have ever had in mourning a close death, and it was done by a postal worker: a stranger turned brother.

- In our continuation of the Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus today shifts from describing "what the Kingdom of Heaven (Beloved Community)" is (as we have gotten generally the last two weeks) to sketching out "how does one live in this Beloved Community"?

Solution: Jesus' invitation to us in the Kingdom of Heaven is to get beyond ourselves and "choose life."

-This is a difficult text in many ways as it talks about many difficult subjects such as Anger, Adultery, Divorce and keeping oaths. Coupled with this weird statement about ripping out one's own eye and cutting off one's hand, these statements of Jesus can be understandably odd.

-This is when, I believe, the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy can help us make a little more sense of it.

-The book of Deuteronomy is a collection of sermons (kind of similar to the Sermon on the Mount) historically to be from Moses. Our reading this morning is believed to be Moses' last sermon to the people as he is looking out onto the promised land (which, remember, he will die before entering). It is some of his last statements to Israel and they are pretty amazing.

-Perhaps the verses from Moses which stick out to me most today are verses 19-20: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you."

-Choose life so that you may live. Now, this might sound cliché to some, but I think choosing life is something that is far more difficult than we can imagine. Choosing life may require us to have a different set of priorities. Choosing life requires us to get out of ourselves. Choosing life in many ways is what I witnessed with Joe: postal worker to friend.

-Choosing life is what, I believe, Jesus is referring to in this challenging section of the Sermon on the Mount.

-Jesus highlights Anger, Adultery, Divorce and the breaking of oaths because they are all issues of broken relationship. They are all things that can take away life instead of give it.

-Anger is mentioned NOT for it to be a sin to be angry. This is ludicrous! Jesus himself gets angry! Jesus mentions this because it's important in how we respond to that anger. Choosing life means allowing anger to flow through healthy channels and reconciliation.

-Adultery is mentioned not out of some moralistic code that can never be fulfilled, but from the area of justice. Choosing life means refusing to see someone as a sexual object. No one should be regarded as a sex object. Choosing life means teaching young girls to see themselves NOT as objects which is increasingly a problem in our society.

-Divorce is mentioned, too, because choosing life means remembering the dignity and humanity of other human beings. In Jesus' time, men could marry women and cast them out if they were not "childbearing" without any warning. Doing so would greatly put a woman's life in danger. Choosing life means seeing your marriage vows as serious and if those vows cannot be met, giving the woman a certificate of divorce instead of casting her into the streets.

-Oaths are mentioned because keeping an oath is sacred. Don't find loopholes. Choosing life means doing what you say you are going to do.

Implication: In what ways can we choose life better?

-What was so important for me in my friendship with Joe, especially during the time I lost my friend, was his ability to see my humanness. Humanness is life. Earthness is

life. Creatureliness is life. I think this is what Jesus is trying to get at and what can be a challenge to the church too.

-How do we choose life in our daily lives? How do we treat one another and ourselves with dignity and respect? It seems so easy, but can be harder than what we think.

-A couple of years back, many of you remember the struggle of removing the Milltown Dam and reservoir. It was a situation that quickly became an argument of two sides: 1) The dam needs to be removed and the heavy metals from Butte need to be cleaned up if the Blackfoot is to be a clean and vital river again. 2) The Milltown Dam and reservoir are marks for history that should be proud of. Taking these things down removes a piece of that history. I wasn't pastor here at the time, but from conversations with Pastor Jean and others in the community, I understand things got heated at times between the two sides. Yet, what I have witnessed following the removal of the Milltown Dam is nothing less than respect and admiration between folks who were clearly on different sides of this issue. People in Bonner and the surrounding area were able to see each other as brother, sister, childhood friend, community member *first* before they saw each other on two different sides of an issue. This affected how they acted towards one another in disagreement and clearly affects how we come together as a community today. Perhaps this can be our guide as our community continues to wrestle with how to be community to one another.

-Choose life so that you may live. May we continue to love and respect one another in our humanness and earthliness, and be Christ to one another remembering to say not "howdy stranger" but "howdy brother/sister/earth". Amen.