

Sermon Title: "Hard Choices"

February 12, 2017

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Sycamore Congregational Church UCC

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Sirach 15:15-20 (at end)

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Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

For many years here at Sycamore, certainly during the time during which both Pastor Sharon and I have served you, we have largely followed the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of reading from many parts of the Bible. The lectionary follows major seasons, like Advent, Lent, and the season of Epiphany, in which we are right now. Each week the lectionary offers us texts from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, usually a psalm, and some prayers that tie into the day's theme. The lectionary follows a three-year cycle, with the exciting names of Year A, B and C. Each of these cycles offers us a path through the church year, which begins not on January 1 but with the first Sunday of Advent.

You can think of the lectionary as being like a map that guides your way through a forest, with high mountain peaks, deep and lonesome valleys, and every once in a while, a swamp – and then we have the choice of walking around the swamp or of wading carefully through it. It is a discipline to follow the lectionary and like the discipline of watching what we eat and getting exercise regularly, it offers long term benefits for a reasonable amount of effort.

One advantage of following the lectionary is that, over time, it helps both the preacher and congregation explore different parts of the Bible. That way we don't fall into the trap of repeating the same message over and over again, based on just a handful of our favorite passages from the Bible.

That's why we are reading today from Sirach. Please take a moment and take your pew Bible out. If it is one of the blue bibles, turn to page \_\_\_\_, which contains the table of contents. Can someone tell me on the page the Book of Sirach starts? Hmm, I think it has a couple of other names. How about the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach? Not there either? How about Ecclesiasticus? Not Ecclesiastes, but Ecclesiasticus...not there either?

Ecclesiasticus, a word meaning "church book" is one of the names for this book. So is Sirach. So is a much longer name, The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach. This book, along with many others, was written in Hebrew, but centuries later than the rest of the Hebrew scriptures. That's one reason that it is part of the Apocrypha, a word meaning "hidden things." The Apocryphal books were included in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible but are not included in the canon for Judaism and the Protestant Old Testament.

There are sixteen of these books that appear in the canon, or collection of sacred books. It turns out that different traditions may include or exclude some of these books. The Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and Protestant traditions each made different decisions about which of the 16 books in the Apocrypha should be included.

Why is this this important? Remember the children's song that includes the words, "for the Bible tells me so"? The version of the Bible many of us have used for most of our lives is just part of a

larger body of scripture and writings inspired by faithful people inspired by God that have been written over the centuries. If you view the Bible as a rule book for how to live your life, there are other wonderful scriptures that can also be helpful. The Apocrypha, a collection of 16 books, is one set; there are many others as well.

One way of thinking about this is that your parents taught you as children how to live your lives. Formally or informally, they gave you a set of instructions about how to live your life in such a way as to bring you the greatest possible sense of goodness and fulfillment. As you grew up over the decades, you learned from many other wise people. Think of the Apocrypha as being like these wise people, who taught you about life in ways that your parents could not, because their life experiences were different.

Sirach is shorthand for a much longer title of this book, which is “the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach”. This book was not written about the son of God, Jesus, or about wise sayings that Jesus, son of Mary uttered. No, the author called himself Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach. He was a teacher of scribes and sales and his teachings were written down in Hebrew about 180 BCE and his grandson produced the Greek version in Egypt about 117 BCE. This is a collection of his teachings and wisdom. You probably noticed how similar these the readings from Deuteronomy and Sirach were. The people created the lectionary were wise and that's why these texts were chosen for this week. I could have just chosen Deuteronomy 30 but then we'd never explore Sirach; thanks to the lectionary we are encountering it.

Our text from Deuteronomy begins with the words: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” Our reading from Sirach includes the words, “If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice... Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given.”

Both texts address two themes: First, as human beings, we have agency, the ability to make choices in our lives. We can make good choices or bad choices. Ones that can be helpful or perhaps harmful.

I am not Kellyanne Conway so what I am about to say is not a commercial. After a break of many years, I recently rejoined Costco. For those of you that live by yourselves, as I do, you know that Costco works best for large families or households that have the ability to store large quantities of food and stuff. Joining Costco is not inherently a good or bad choice, but it does have consequences. I like a particular brand of yogurt for breakfast, but because I bought some at Costco, I had 18 servings of yogurt that took up most of one shelf in my refrigerator. I like to have the flexibility of choosing what I eat but having 18 containers of yogurt means that I have gotten just bit tired of eating yogurt for breakfast. But on the other hand, perhaps that is a good thing. There are far worse things to eat for breakfast.

For one, Costco also has cereal, which comes not in single box quantities, but in double boxes. I have learned that having an essentially unlimited amount of cereal, which one can eat not only for breakfasts, but as a snack and for a late night dessert is not a wise decision on my part, so I probably will try not to buy cereal at Costco again.

Both our text from Deuteronomy and Sirach are about far more important decisions in life than the decision of whether to buy yogurt or cereal, or whether to buy from Costco at all.

That brings us to the second theme: How are we to live our lives? One of the consistent annoying things about wise parents or scriptures, whether they are part of the canon or not, is that there are usually clear choices to be made. While we may rebel against the notion of binary choices, it can sometimes simplify our decision making. Deuteronomy describes our choices as being between life and prosperity on one hand, and death and adversity on the other. Sirach gives us the choice between fire, which burns, and water, which gives life. Either reading suggests we have an easy choice to make.

Our passage from Deuteronomy describes the choices that God's people faced thousands of years ago, to follow God's commandments or not. We face those same choices today, as citizens on of planet Earth, as a nation, as a church, as families, and as individuals. God always wants us to choose to do the right thing. This was embodied in the scout oath that was recited last week: "On my honor, I will do my best. To do my duty to God and my country; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight; meaning to have good relationships with others." It's pretty simple isn't it?

Even if it seems overly simplistic, sometimes thinking in binary terms can be helpful. Having yogurt, even 18 containers of it, is good for me. Having cereal in the house, on the other hand, is not, because I know that if it is in my house, I will eat it. The same goes for other foods and sweets.

You know which people in your life make you happier and which do not. To the extent you can, choose with whom to spend your precious time on earth. This may mean having difficult conversations but to do so, is to choose life.

If certain activities take up too much of your time, such as following the latest tweets from certain politicians or the immediate storm of moral outrage against their tweets or pronouncements, unplug. That is the path to life and psychological prosperity. I was recently with a group of friends talking politics and laughing about what Stephen Colbert had to say. While this was in some ways harmless fun, I also realized most of us weren't doing anything that would make a difference 4 years from now. On the other hand, one of our friends described the positive actions she was taking to help protect advancements our society had made over decades; she was choosing life, not only for herself but others.

These are people in your life that feed you in a positive way. You know who they are. If you don't have such a person, find one. There are activities that you know are good for the health of your mind, body and spirit.

Do them, every day. Not doing so, even if all you can do is spend a few minutes a day is the path, to be dramatic, is the path towards death. Instead, choose life. God wants you to live a life of abundance, even if is just for a few minutes each day.

Decide to spend some time each day seeking higher things in life; being in nature, reading scripture, praying and following other spiritual disciplines, like being in silence. Listening to music instead of the TV or news, and spend time with friends. If you are reading scripture, whether from the Bible or other sacred texts, decide if they are helpful or harmful to you. Choose wisely.

Remember Paul's words to the Philippians: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

You have choices. You have agency. Start small if you must, but start and continue. Make good choices as if your life depended upon it, for it does. The Good News is that you know what the right thing to do so; so follow your guide, and do it.

In closing, hear the wisdom of Jesus, the son of Sirach: "Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses, will be given. For great is the wisdom of the Lord." Amen.

### **Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 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 and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

### **Sirach 15:15-20**

If you choose to, you will keep the commandments, and keep faith out of goodwill. He has put fire and water before you; you can stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Life and death are in front of human beings; and they will be granted whichever they please, because the wisdom of the Lord is great; he's mighty in authority, he sees everything, his eyes are upon those who fear him, and he knows every human action. He doesn't command anyone to be ungodly, and he doesn't give anyone a license to sin.