

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Romans 8: 35-39
excerpts from Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front by Wendell Berry

I had an epiphany of sorts this week about myself and my forebears – specifically about my grandmother, my Aunt Julie, and my mom. They were notorious for being women of strong opinions, a trait that (it is said) I myself bear as well. I like to think of it as a “gift of clarity” about the world. ☺ Well it suddenly came to me where that “gift of clarity” came from! I believe that it had 2 sources.

First, we were poor. You see, money provides choices that a lack of money will never see. And we didn’t have many choices. So when we were given a chance to make a choice, my siblings and I were expected to choose, we were expected to make a choice. When we were given an option, we were expected to have an opinion and to express it. .

My mother told a story from her own childhood about a time when her mother invited a neighbor to have dinner with them. When offered the choice between potatoes or grits, the neighbor made the mistake of demurring in what was perceived to be a saccharine tone, “Oh, it really doesn’t matter.” Needless to say my grandmother was not pleased, and the neighbor was never invited back. Choices matter. When given a choice, make one. This is a Randall family value.

The second source of my family’s ‘gift of clarity’ was our faith. There were 2 essential tenets of our faith: 1) God loves us and the world. 2) God gave us free will. Those 2 things put together mean that “everything matters”! so not caring is not an option. Things matter, people matter, choices matter. Every choice you are lucky enough to be given to make is important – whether it’s “potatoes or grits?” “paper or plastic?” , “fair trade or sweatshop?” “farmers’ market or Walmart?”, “blessing or curse?” “Life or death?”. If you are alive in the world, then what you choose matters. Not caring is not an option. Apathy is not acceptable! We need to be – we must be – ready, willing, and able to choose. And I believe that God hopes, really hopes, that we will choose life.

Today, I want to talk with you about choices...about choosing life. And because choosing life has everything to do with our Christian faith, I’m going to talk about ‘what matters’ and ‘choices’, in terms of the 3 days that matter the most in our church year: Christmas, Good Friday and Easter.

In our church world Christmas matters. Heck, Christmas matters to the not-church world, too! But have you ever considered that Christmas is a love story? It’s a love story – and it’s my favorite chapter in the much bigger saga of God’s astounding love for the world. The Cliff Note version of that amazing love story goes something like this:

Whether by forming everything from nothing over a period of six 24 hour days, or by the Big Bang and evolution over billions of years, God formed the whole entire universe and everything that’s in it, and declared that it was good. Somewhere along the line, God made people – and you know something? Even we were good.

But don’t be thinking that God was just creating helter skelter, pell mell, willy nilly, without rhyme or reason. No way. Even as God was whipping up amazingly complicated stuff like DNA, the Grand Canyon, & the Spiral Nebulae (along with slugs, poison oak, and mosquitoes), God also had hope for everything, and God especially had hope for us peculiar human creatures – hope that was about our life together, hopeful of love, justice and peace, hopeful of goodwill and happiness. God’s hope was about happy endings – and happy beginnings and happy middles, too. The hope of God was full of joy for us and all our possibilities – and for all of creation.

Now here’s where the story gets really interesting: For some strange and beautiful and confounding reason, God decided that human beings would be created in God’s own image, with 2 astoundingly divine

traits: imagination and free will. The imagination piece was so humans could co-create with God, making things like the Sistine Chapel, Etch a Sketches, poetry, surfboards, and penicillin.

And the free will piece was so we could consider choices like: “Do I feel like co-creating with God today, or do I feel like watching re-runs of ‘Law and Order?’” “Do I feel like co-creating with God today, or do I feel like playing Angry Birds for 6 hours?”. Free will enables us to choose how we want to live – like creating something beautiful, or cleaning up a beach, or loving someone dearly, OR spending the day in decidedly more self-absorbed couch-potato like activities.

Now some folks think that free will is a rather strange – maybe even bad trait for God to have given us, considering how much time we spend doing the self-absorbed stuff. Certainly, God could have just hard-wired us to live in love and beauty, justice and peace, harmony and goodwill. But no, God is a very optimistic Creator of the Universe who believes that human beings are actually capable of making good choices and will someday choose to live in love and justice and peace and harmony and goodwill with one another. That is such a beautiful hope!!

Which is why we have got to be a constant source of disappointment to God. Over the course of human history, humanity has failed time and again to live decently and respectfully, let alone lovingly, with anyone on any scale much larger than a softball team. It’s a wonder that God even bothers with us anymore.

Which is why the love story of Christmas is so dazzling. Even though we weren't able to much fulfill the hope that God had for us at creation, God continued to love us anyway, and then decided to pop over here and give us a hand. How amazing! God took pity on our poor stumbling ways and decided to come here and help us out!

And this is the part that just blows me away: God didn't come into the world like some great Greek warrior-god, hurling lightning bolts and shouting with a voice like thunder. Nor did God come floating down from the heavens as a white-bearded judge sitting on a golden throne, dispensing blessings and curses. No. God came to us in a fashion that was much more simple (and waaay more complicated) than anything we could have imagined: “Incarnation”, in our flesh.

Once God became one of us, the hopes and dreams of the Creator of the Universe could begin again to unfold. In coming to us as one of us, God affirmed that bewildering decision to allow us to make our own decisions. At Christmas, God's transforming love for all of creation gave us another chance to become the real fully-embodied children of God we were created to be; the coming of Christ gave us the chance—and the challenge – to become God's partners in bringing to fulfillment the divine hope for peace and harmony and goodwill and justice and love in the world.

In coming to us through that ordinary baby beginning, the Creator of the Whole Entire Universe showed us that whatever terrible things we human creature might do, however broken we may be, the power of Divine love is stronger, and calls us constantly toward healing & wholeness and love & justice: to what in Hebrew is called shalom.

When we say “peace” in English, it is pretty dependably being used simply in reference to a lack of violence. But shalom is about waaay more than that. It’s about the peace that comes from being healed, from being restored to wholeness -- for individuals and for communities! Shalom is about being made whole -- it’s about justice -- where conflicts are resolved and meaningful restitution made. Shalom means reconciliation with God and neighbor. Shalom means hearts that feel safe – that ARE safe – and hearts that are open to everything and everyone around them. The earth depends on shalom – true peace – to provide life to us all. But it’s waaaay easier said than done. Violence, death & despair seem to just hang on to us at every turn. Good Fridays fill our calendars.

Good Friday, the day that Jesus was killed, is a reality for us all. I know that all of us can identify only too well with the despair, tears, and torment that the disciples went through when they found themselves

lost in the valley of the shadow of death without a shred of Easter hope. Sooner or later, each of us experiences the excruciating loss of joy and hope. Loved ones die, relationships end, jobs are lost; terrible illness strikes -- not only the old, but the young and vigorous; there's global financial chaos, murder throughout the world in the name of religion, an unending spiral of violence and vengeance in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and much of eastern Europe. There's global warming, the reality of terrorism and a growing pessimism that this new millennium of ours is turning out to be even worse than the old one. Good Friday is our world. Sadly, Good Friday matters.

Which is why Easter really matters. In as dark a world as ours can seem these days, it is essential that we remember that resurrection happens. Death did not have the last word in the Jesus story did it? No way. But here's a curious thought: did the resurrection happen in the bright shining light of day? Do you remember? Did anyone see the stone being rolled away? No! Resurrection happened, but it happened when no one was looking. Resurrection happened while it was still dark. No one may have seen the stone being rolled away, no one may have recognized the presence of angels through their tears, but resurrection happened, life was restored, wholeness was restored, shalom was restored.

Truth to tell, when resurrection happens -- it pretty much always happens while it's still dark -- when we don't expect it. You know what I'm talking about? We've actually seen it happen in our own lifetimes! As we sat in the dark and fretted about what the world was coming to, the Wall was torn down in Berlin. Apartheid crumbled in South Africa. Relationships between Catholics and Protestants were re-built in northern Ireland. Sarajevo, virtually destroyed in the longest siege in the history of modern warfare has been rebuilt and is growing by the day. Researchers have found incredibly effective treatments for HIV and AIDs. Heck, the Giants even won the World Series after more than half a century. Resurrection actually does happen, and it happens while the world is still dark.

In many, many ways, our world is still dark. But because of the resurrection, because of our faith, we know that death and despair are never the end. We know that anguish and desolation do not win. So we must do our best to hope even when hope seems ridiculous -- actually we must do our best to hope especially when hope seems ridiculous! In fact, we must practice resurrection!!

Practice resurrection. Wendell Berry says it beautifully in his Mad Farmer Manifesto: He reminds us that our job as people of faith is to love God and to love the world. And to love someone who doesn't deserve it. He advises us to ask the questions that have no answers. To plant sequoias. To laugh and be joyful. He says we need to "Expect the end of the world -- and practice resurrection".

Practice resurrection. Pay attention to what death looks like in all its forms and resist its advance at every turn. Remember what true life looks like -- and never ever ever give up on God's hope and dream for creation: shalom -- real peace, real wellness, real wholeness, and real love that is on tap at the beginning, coursing through the middle and bubbling through in the fulfillment of life.

You see, resurrection matters. Resurrection is bigger than our doubts, bigger than our fears, bigger than any accommodation to the ways of death, bigger than any army or dictator or drug or emotion or president or power monger who would stand over you and wrestle your life from your hands.

Practice resurrection and dare to laugh, work, dance, love, share, enjoy, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Stare death in the face when it happens, and weep. But don't close your eyes, and above all, never give up. Choose life.

Like the people of Israel, we still have to be about the business of choosing. Over and over again we are given the opportunity to choose life and to practice resurrection. Sometimes we do great, and sometimes we may not choose well at all, but at that very instant God gives us another chance and another chance and another chance to make a better choice, and God hopes, truly hopes that we choose well, that we choose life, the next time. And here's the great news--no matter how long it takes for us to make the

right choice I am also “certain that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior.”

So what matters? For any number of reasons Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter all matter, truly matter. Choose wisely, my friends, and practice resurrection. Amen.