



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Choosing Life

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

September 8, 2013

Over the Labor Day weekend, the Short Beach neighborhood held its traditional Short Beach Days, a real old fashioned community celebration with everything from sack races, softball games, a lip-syncing contest, and a parade, to picnics and cookouts all over the place. We were invited to one of the picnics and it was wonderful to see such a vibrant, connected group of people. They were excited to meet newcomers to their neighborhood - all chatting about who had lived in the house before and what the new owners were going to do. The kids all knew each other, and were constantly running back and forth between houses. This is the kind of neighborhood where you really do dash next door when you run out of eggs or milk. Your neighbors watch your house when you are out of town. New people meet the neighbors when they drop by to introduce themselves and drop off a welcome gift. It's surely not perfect, but it is a nice life. It seems clear that the folks in this neighborhood have chosen to make it that way.

This choice about how to live well in community ties into our reading today from Deuteronomy has this wonderful instruction from God. "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 may live..." It's a little circular, but it is the ultimate challenge of human free will. We do have the freedom to make decisions that make a difference in how we make our journey. This reading makes it sound simple and clear - blessings or curses, life or death. But have you ever tried to generate a good definition of life? Trust me; I have, because I wanted to know what God is offering us here.

When you start to ask "what is life?" the first set of answers that come up against tend to be scientific, biological and medical. The medical definitions identify the markers that tell us we aren't dead - heartbeat, blood pressure, brain activity. Medicine tells us that life is present when various functions are measurable. Big debates happen around life issues, when does it start, when does it end. Terry Schaivo's sad situation caused people to wonder whether her vegetative state could really be considered living.

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Various scientific disciplines focus on how life got started on earth, with all manner of interesting tidbits of information. That life exists at all is a great cosmological and biological mystery - is life a happy accident or the product of intention from some source? Is it merely a process of mutation and evolution? There are no easy answers but these are great questions.

And even though most scientific and medical definitions do not seem to help us understand what kind of life God is offering when he urges us to "choose life", quantum physics has an intriguing perspective. This most interesting scientific/metaphysical field tells us things like, nothing exists unless it is observed, the presence of an observer will affect what a particle does, everything is in relationship with everything else and affects everything else. Quantum mechanics is quirky - things being simultaneously in more than one place, going backwards and forward in time - maybe that helps us understand the "life" that that God wants us to choose. Life must be about endless possibility.

On the other hand, perhaps we should start with this kind of definition for life: "the condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter, including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death." The one word that catches my imagination in this definition is "capacity". Otherwise, it makes it sound as though life is little more than not being dead or not being a stone. Capacity is a nod to the dynamic nature of existence. Life is about growth, new beginnings, and emerging opportunities.

When we hear the words of Deuteronomy, we notice that life is paired with blessing. Blessings are the good things of life - food, companionship, beauty, offspring, meaningful work. From this we can deduce that life is not merely existence, it is a quality of existence. Real life is more than the daily grind, more than mere subsistence. It is found in moment to moment change, even in the bleakest of lives.

I thought about another interesting exercise in thinking about what kind of "life" wants us to choose. If you could create your own life, what would you fill it with? Here's my stab at it. It goes without saying that life requires love. So that's a given. Then, I would design my life to be filled with joy and laughter, sometimes at circumstances and silliness and often at myself. G.K. Chesterton, that most quotable Brit, said "angels fly because they take themselves lightly." I would want to be an angel in my own life. For life to be interesting, I would give it challenge, some measure of hardship and a great dose of wonder. Hardship gives us context. In my own life, I didn't truly understand happiness until I had experienced severe depression. It was horrible, but now I know that I wouldn't be who I am without having gone through it, and I am able to understand life differently because of my experience with depression.

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I would pack my life with curiosity and a sense of adventure which would make me always look for something new to try or learn. A rich life requires an open mind; otherwise, we convince ourselves that we know everything there is to know. An open mind is sensitive to the experience of others and that's what makes us compassionate. I would want to live a hungry life, always searching for that which truly nourishes. And all of these aspects of a good life are realized most fully when we share them with others.

Yesterday, we all put on an awesome display of life. We worked hard together to present a fabulous assembly of goodies for others to enjoy. We had fun sharing the product of our time and treasures with those who came to enjoy some good community fun. We ate and sang and shared stories, all while raising some funds that we can later share with those who need it. And we built our first labyrinth of canned goods, which you so generously assembled for the benefit of those we need help every day in our community. The energy of endless possibility, emerging opportunity, and love for one another was palpable, and I cannot help but think that this indeed is the "life" that God wants us desperately to choose.

As we leave the wonderful, frolicking days of summer behind and rejoice in yet another great Fair - and God bless all of you who worked so hard to make it so- let us choose a "life" of challenge, and dedication, so that we might live with love and concern for others. Let us choose a "life" of hope and trust so that we might live with open minded embrace of a world full of possibility. And let us choose a "life" of community with each other, so that we might live with the joy and confidence of knowing that, like the neighbors of Short Beach, we are always there for each other. Thank you again for all that you do to make it so.

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