

The Way of Blessing and the Way of Curse By Rev. Rebecca Clancy

Deuteronomy 11:18
Matthew 19:13-15

When my father's cancer returned, as the doctors assured us it would, it returned with a vengeance. The doctors told us that treatment was useless and would only prolong his suffering. And so, a grim wait ensued. No one, including my father, wanted to acknowledge his impending death, so no one did. It wasn't so much that we were trying to avoid facing reality. It was more that we were all struggling so hard with reality, all in such fragile and precarious shape, that and no one wanted to risk exacerbating the other's grief.

But then the silence was finally broken. The phone rang at my house one evening much later than it usually rings. It was my father. "I think my time has about come," he said, "and there are some things I need to talk to you about." My father had retired to Wisconsin, and so I made some hasty preparations for the care of my children, got into the car, and left straight away. The three-hour trip took me closer to two. I wasn't sure how much time he had. I made it to his bedside, though. He talked to me. And I listened.

I can't say that I always listened to my father. As a teenager, I had all the answers myself. I listened when it suited me. As a young adult I was consumed with my own life. I listened when I had the time. But there at his deathbed, I listened. I listened like I've never listened before.

It was because I learned then and there what only experience can teach – that the charge of the dying to the living is a sacred charge. I have often wondered since why this is. I think it is

because when someone is dying, you appreciate most fully all you received from him and how much you owe him. And then you realize that it's *really* how much you have received from God and how much you owe him. And in that experience you feel very surely God's grace, and you want more than anything to respond to it. This, I think, is why the charge of the dying to the living is sacred. So I listened, and I obeyed.

It was like that at the death of Moses. Moses had heeded God's call and commission at the burning bush. He had rescued his people from Egyptian slavery. He had led them through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments. And he had delivered them to the border of the Promised Land. He had hoped to bring them into the Promised Land, but the Lord informed him that his time had now come.

And so Moses gathered his people together and made that sacred charge from the dying to the living. And what was that charge? We heard some of it in this morning's Old Testament lesson. Moses charged his people to teach their children the word of the Lord. They listened, and they obeyed. And they recorded that charge so that the faithful in coming generations would too listen and obey.

But even as we recommit ourselves this Rally Day to do so, we may well wonder why? Why was this charge so important? Moses went on to explain why. He explained that each and every day of our lives, the way of blessing and the way of curse is set before us, and it is ours to decide between them.

And of course he absolutely is right. There is not one day that is not a day for us to decide between the way of blessing and the way of curse – in the words we speak, or fail to speak; in the action we take, or fail to take; in the duty we meet, or fail to meet; in the sacrifice we make, or fail to make; in the fear we overcome, or fail to overcome; in what we give, or fail to give, in the love we share or fail to share. Each and every day is a day for us to decide between the way of blessing and the way of curse -- for our own sakes, for the sake of those around us, and for the sake of the larger word. This is the way that the Lord has ordered our life, and it is the way we make the Lord's difference through our lives, or we don't.

And how can our children decide between the way of blessing and the way of curse if we do not teach our children the word of the Lord? The answer is simple. They can't. If we do not teach our children the word of the Lord then we *choose* for them the way of curse. This is why Moses' charge was so important.

Another school year now lies before us. There is so much we want our children to learn. We want them to learn the academic curriculum, of course, and at the highest and most intensive level possible. And then there is soccer and football and music and singing and dancing and all the rest of it. And this is well and good. Education is one of the greatest privileges we can bestow upon our children and a necessary precondition for human development. But if our children do not learn the word of the Lord and learn to decide wisely between the way of blessing and curse, they risk gaining the world and losing their souls. Our children will learn everything except the most important thing.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus' ministry was nearing its end, but the excitement his ministry had generated was still mounting. He had become a public sensation, gathering enthusiastic crowds wherever he went. Yet for the disciples there was a brooding sense of foreboding, as if the higher the excitement mounted the closer Jesus came to his death. They could not escape feeling latent tension and anxiety. No one else picked up on this, however – certainly not the parents who kept crowding Jesus with their children, asking him to lay his hand on them. But under the circumstances it only served to prick the disciples nerves, so they sent the parents away. But Jesus rebuked the disciples. “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

Jesus then and there added children to those he had declared would become the heirs of the kingdom of heaven -- the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure, and the peacemakers. This is because Jesus knew the hearts of children. He knew their innocence, their openness, their sympathy, their vulnerability, their intuition, their willingness to believe. He knew that their hearts would be inclined to receive him and to love him. And so he wanted them to come to him.

But the children can't come to him if we don't take them to him. In this way it is ours this day to decide between the way of blessing and the way of curse. Amen.