

Life-and-death choices

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This is not a Sunday for soft-peddalling the gospel. Moses and Jesus portray the life of faith as a "yes" or a "no" to God with lives that obey or that disobey. It is little wonder that it is common to summarize Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount with one verse, the "Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12).

I have a hunch that this is a strategy that conveniently enables us to shift our attention away from verses that portray the hellfire to be faced if we are angry with a sister or brother, or the eye that we would be better off losing rather than looking upon another with lust. Shifting attention from hard, life-and-death choices is called "denial" when practiced by addicts. I wonder what it's called when practiced by the church?

The choice between life and death that Moses places before Israel and that Jesus places before his disciples is a reminder of the early Christian training manual called the Didache. After portraying the stark differences between the way of life and the way of death, it concludes that "if you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able to do this, do what you are able."

I suspect that the insecure perfectionist in me runs from the demands of the Sermon on the Mount because I do not trust that what I am able to do is precisely what is required of me. I think that this is also true of the church I serve.

"When Jesus bids a man come and follow him," says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "he bids him come and die." These words provide a link between Moses' invitation to choose life and Jesus' call to a life that is marked by cross-bearing. In a culture that soaks us in promises of a comfortable life on easy terms, the gospel tells a wildly different story. In it dying is the beginning, not the end of life. It should come as little surprise that we have real trouble trusting our future to this gospel.