

God of life, Epiphany 6A (*Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37; Psalm 119:1-8*)

How can we live together as God's people, people who flow with God's eternal life?

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The God of Israel cares about life—not only our lives, but also the life of the world. God is a God of life. This passage from Deuteronomy remembers God's covenant of life: that God and God's people may flourish together.

In the passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers further instruction about how God's covenant leads to life. That's what the Sermon on the Mount is all about: How can we live together as God's people, people who flow with God's eternal life, pouring out blessing on all people? Jesus tells us what it means to be people who choose life for the world.

Killing is no way to live with one another. The anger, Jesus says, the hatred inside of us that overflows into acts of violence—if we harbor such attitudes toward one another, we won't be able to live into the fullness of God's life among us. If we are busy holding grudges, we cut off opportunities for us to welcome God. Yet, through forgiveness, we are shown a new way, the way of life.

Jesus goes on to help us to see what it means to identify our life with God's life, to be people who choose life even while we live in a world of death. This involves truth-telling. God's people are people who tell the truth about the world and about ourselves. We refuse illusions: "Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no.'"

If everyone knows that you live and speak without deceit, then you don't need to swear. You don't need to appeal to a power outside of yourself to get someone to believe you. You are your word. Your truthfulness is the form of your life. Jesus says that his followers—people who let God's law shape their lives—will be so truthful in word and in deed that people will trust us when we say yes and when we say no. Our words will echo with the truthfulness of our lives.

My slim Mennonite confession of faith—only 24 articles—devotes a whole page to our Christian pledge to the truth in all aspects of our lives. To be a Mennonite is to be rooted in a history of people who were persecuted for their witness, martyred for their stubborn truthfulness. To follow their example—to be killed as a result of a confession of faith—is our “baptism of blood,” as our confession calls it.

On April 4, 2018, in St. Marys, Georgia, seven Roman Catholics trespassed into the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base, a military facility that houses the Trident nuclear missile system. They poured bottles of their own blood into the ground as close to the warheads as they could get before they were arrested. Their public action was a form of truth-telling, a truth spoken with their lives and sealed with their blood. They now face the possibility of a decade in prison.

My friend Patrick O'Neill was among the seven people arrested. We've stood side by side for peace in North Carolina for the past two decades—risking arrest at an ICE detention center, protesting the CIA's extraordinary rendition program at an airfield operated by Aero Contractors, and marching across the state each Holy Week to expose sites of injustice. Now he and his comrades have given their bodies as a declaration of truth, exposing the weapons of global annihilation at the heart of U.S. military power. “I splashed the blood on the base logo,” Patrick told me after his trial. “I told the jury the truth represented by the blood, that the blood makes real the purpose of Trident, the massive destruction of God's creation.”

The Kings Bay Plowshares 7 have given their lives to truth. The jury found them guilty, and now they await sentencing. They have chosen, in the words of Moses, to bear witness to life, a life for you and your descendants. “Christianity is a message of life,” writes Gustavo Gutierrez, “a message based on the gratuitous love of God for us... Christian existence is a style of life.”

To love God's law is to love God's creation, to declare life amid a world of death. After the Kings Bay Plowshares 7 poured blood at the naval base, they spray-painted

their message on the entryway sidewalk for all to see: “Love one another” and “Repent.” They have pledged their lives to proclaim the law of God.

As the Psalmist says, “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.”