

## **“Choosing Life Inside Out”**

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler Pennsylvania  
February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“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 and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him . . .”*

-- Deuteronomy 30:19-20a, NRSV



*(As seen at <http://hulettrealty.com/do-i-need-a-home-inspection/>)*

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Part of the arduous process of selling a home these days is the home inspection. The corner-by-corner, wire-by-wire, pipe-by-pipe minute investigation of every square inch of the place one intends to buy and the equally microscopic inspection of what another is trying to sell!

On any given day otherwise, the look around a house is cursory and casual. We make our sweeps, register our impressions and move one . . . But when it comes down to buying and selling, the stakes are higher! Good money is paid for prying eyes that look deeply and well . . . at everything!

That is the point isn't it? Nobody wants a surprise behind the baseboards, or a spark of ozone coming from a living room wall receptacle, or a plastic wading pool up under attic eaves to collect the rain water when it pours come move-in day. . . The home inspection is the one that looks carefully on the inside, past the good looks and surface appeal on the outside. We don't see those things ourselves too often until we have to. . .

Fact is we're more interested in the things on the outside – things that show up brightly, or keep pace with "the Jones'" or the other folks we know or want to know, that impress our fancy and make us yearn for more.

I remember being the development agent for the church camp in a former presbytery as we sought commitment from donors for a multi-million dollar capital improvement campaign . . . The problem was, however, that in order to do all the really fun and exciting building projects – the second half of the campaign – we had to convince people to give to a sewer line and earth-moving first. . . Big shovel projects that frankly would never show up on people's radars. Toilets are meant to flush when you pull the lever . . . there's very little thought given to them beyond that – But! A New Olympic-sized swimming pool, or recreation center – wowie! It wasn't easy selling sewers when the vision was bigger and better Christian camper programs!

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister-writer from Vermont weighs in here. He writes, *"Increasingly we live from the outside in rather than from the inside out, taking our cues from the world, taking our cues from others, taking our cues from culture"* -- while ignoring whatever mat be going on inside us. Like the house that has a beautiful deck and patio, but whose basement sump-pump hasn't worked in years!

The evidence of our preoccupation on the outside can be seen quite graphically – super Bowl commercials are a spectacle unto themselves! Millions of dollars to produce and millions of dollars to place, advertisers angle to make a splash or a show of their products on that big day – to get you to look

at them and take a cue from their catalogue about the next best thing for you to drink, drive, eat, or wear.

A few years ago, Chrysler Motors ran a Super Bowl ad that featured the new Chrysler 200 which ended up being as much an ad for the beleaguered city of Detroit as anything about the car itself; the ad cost \$9,000,000 dollars to produce and millions more to put on the air for two whole Super Bowl minutes . . . Interestingly, what the ad wanted to do was to get viewers to see Detroit from the inside, not its outside; to see the real Detroit, not the city many believe is a "white-washed tomb."<sup>ii</sup>

Some home inspections lead to just such a conclusion – shocking buyers and sellers, sellers and buyers . . . "White-washed tombs" – Read: "Fresh coat of paint" . . . The close-up inspection of the inside can be tough on everyone.

Jesus argued as much in his list of antithesis in the Sermon on the Mount: *"You have heard it said . . ., but I say to you . . ."* There was in the Law, the emphasis on one's public behavior built into the prohibition: *"whoever murders shall be liable to judgment . . . You shall not commit adultery . . . Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce . . . You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord . . ."* But Jesus moves from sheer outward behavior – the acts done in public (the things seen) – to interior motives (the private acts of will that are not noticed at all).

In the broad scheme of things we don't think of ourselves as violators of the Ten Commandments on a regular basis – they are written in big, bold strokes that most of us can keep . . . Unless we define murder as something more like the anger that chokes us inside in our hatred of someone else; or define our idols and graven images of other gods as something more like the shiny new digital 4-G doodad by which we will "rule the air" or the new addition to our QVC wardrobe that we just must have; and we do not covet our neighbor's spouse, nor act out on such impulses, unless of course you count all those other times and other places where we look – and keep on looking – at

nameless and unknown strangers. . . what Jesus does in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is to bring life into the Law – in our hearts and minds, in our motives and our impulses, not simply in our outward actions and reactions. He takes the Law and walks into our houses with it, so to speak, like the home inspector with his clipboard and starts taking inventory of all of our interior systems. Even the ones we have forgotten were important of have neglected in years.

. . . As Moses was departing the people of Israel he set before them “life and prosperity, death and adversity.” What he argued for was their embrace of a maintenance program that would become a kind of inner compass, which in living consistently, would continue to provide opportunities for creating



life. *“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 and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him . . .”*<sup>iii</sup> The great Jewish blessing made famous in “Fiddler on the Roof” is no accident – *L’Chayim! – To Life!*

(Photo Above: the Hebrew word “Chai” – “Life” in sandstone relief in the Arava desert (the Negev) of Southern Israel.<sup>iv</sup>)

The scripture is filled with passages that set before its readers alternate paths. One is life, the other is death. Our lives are journeys from one place to another and along the way we are always making choices that create and sustain life, or find ways to crush and kill it. Jesus knew as much and so he wanted those he loves to realize how much is so near at hand, within our grasp – within our eyes.

The great prayer of Saint Patrick (known to many as “St. Patrick’s Breastplate”) includes these wonderful words; almost a pleading at the start of a new day:

***Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,***

***Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.<sup>v</sup>***

Do you comprehend it? Christ in every eye that sees me – how can I look at another and see Christ looking back at me? What might that do to bring new life to her, or him, or me? Christ in the mouth or ear of everyone who speaks of me or hears me – and me, them? What creative act or spark would that yield in blessing?

How did you do at being salt and light this week? At receiving salt and light from others? Did you have any life-giving moments whereby you were Christ for others, creating life and sustaining life by what you did or said? And they reached out to you in the same way?

How will you go about choosing life this week in such a way that death will not be able to creep in over the doorstep? In what ways will you seek to work at the things in your life that need maintenance and fixing-up – the things that no one will ever really see – but you will know are good and true? How will you find new ways to choose life from the inside out that will be a blessing to you in your journey with Jesus?

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> As quoted by Dr. Marcos Borg in "Listening for the Voice of God" at <http://explorefaith.org/homiliesLent/LentenHomily03.17.03.html>

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://www.allpar.com/corporate/chrysler-group/super-bowl-ad.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19-20a, NRSV.

<sup>iv</sup> The photo is part of a posting from Tufts University concerning a campus art exhibit in late 2012 by Andrew Rogers entitled, "Global Land Art". See <https://sites.tufts.edu/events/tag/art-gallery/>

<sup>v</sup> Read more at <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/prayerplainandsimple/2009/07/praying-st-patricks-breastplate.html#TKPzR3QmaYvhfWc8.99>