

There is an invitation to the practical in these scriptures today. An invitation from our God to look clear-eyed at the choices before us; an invitation to understand the implications of these choices, and then to enter in with careful intentionality.

The God of Deuteronomy re-iterates for the people of God the character and the intent of the God who created them. This God is a God who provides; a God who liberates from the things that bind; and a God who intends the flourishing of the land and the creatures on it. This God blesses the people and brings them closer to the flourishing they were made for as they, in return, choose life, as they choose the way and the life God wants for them.

Now choosing has practical implications – it’s not just about stating a belief. It’s about how life gets lived. According to the law, it’s about living honorably, respecting the human dignity of others, paying special attention to the vulnerable, and taking care of the earth for the sake of God’s glory and for the good of all. As the people in exile that we talked about last week will testify, when we fall away from these things, we find ourselves in isolation and alienation from all that makes life good and meaningful.

Jesus brings God close to us. In the practical embodied life of Jesus, he brings to us this God who wants our flourishing and this God who is merciful, who knows our suffering, our doubts and the ways we fail to stay faithful. And he reveals a God who accepts us anyway - loves us, claims us even as we abandon the life God has called us to. Jesus powerfully reminds us that we make the choice for the life God wants for us as a response to the provision of God and not to earn it.

The Spirit of this God, this Jesus, invites the church into formation to proclaim this God who loves us no matter what and to make God’s love present by loving as Jesus loved. The Spirit empowers us to love in the real and practical ways that Jesus did - by welcoming the outsider, feeding the hungry, forgiving our enemies and eating with them, and working for reconciliation and peace in our churches, in our families, in our communities, and in the world.

Now as we are gathered by the Spirit to this way of God, Jesus wants us to be clear-eyed about the cost that may be demanded of us. He wants us to be clear-eyed,

not so that we can weigh up whether it's worth it or not. It's worth it. Life lies this way. He shows us that in all he did for us. But he wants us to be clear-eyed, I think, so that we can be ready to help each other stay faithful to the practices that way of God calls us to.

Now, as we look at this text from Luke that asks us to count the cost, Jesus starts with this proclamation that you'll need to put me first always hating even mother and father, wife and children, brothers and sisters. We need to bear in mind, beloved, that the idea in Jesus' culture - where family is the center of how society is organized and where honor is primarily located - the idea that you would hate your family for the sake of another ideal is deeply shocking and deliberately provocative. I think that is the point. To get us to understand the seriousness of this way.

Hate is simply not something Jesus avowed. He looked with love and treated non-violently those who opposed him. It is not the case, given all that Jesus taught, that your family should not matter to you when you come to follow Jesus. But we should understand the seriousness of our call, we should realize that we are going to have to re-order our priorities and let this way of Jesus, the way of peace and love, be the foundation of all our other relationships.

And then Jesus goes on to talk about cost. It is curious, but it is true, that pursuing peace and inclusion and sacrificial love does have a cost in our world. It upsets those drives and powers that prioritize greed and accumulation and that are prepared to sacrifice human dignity on the altar of wealth and status and false security. These drives exist in us and in our society and as we go this way we will have to work to discern and decide sometimes under great pressure whether we are on still the right track. It will get difficult and confusing, and, Jesus says, we should be ready for that.

So, practically speaking, how do we do that? How to we be ready? Well beloved, we need to get really practical. We need to get clear as people and as a community on what we value and what we intend to be about so, that when we find ourselves with difficult choices, as we find ourselves under pressure or confused, we can take a breath and measure our choices, not by the pressures of the moment, by who we said we would be and what we said we would be about.

I work with a lot of churches as part of the community development work I do with presbytery, and I have studied the life and work of churches from all over as a part of this work. It is common for churches, like most organizations, to have mission or vision statements. These are good general statements where the church usually names the Christian nature of the community and the intent of that community to serve in the name of God.

Calvary has some lovely statements of this nature. Our mission statement says Calvary Presbyterian Church is called to embrace our Christian faith and encourage all generations into a life changing relationship with Christ. And a vision statement that describes Calvary as a worshiping family of believers, centered in Christ, led by His Holy Spirit, rooted in God's Word, growing in love, branching out in faith to serve God in our church, our community, and all around the world.

These are wonderful statements that affirm the Christian character of this place and the intent to serve, but a question we might ask is, practically speaking, how do they get interpreted by the people of this place? How do we plan to live them? What does love look like here? What particular, specific, word-based, Christ-centered values, root our Christian commitment and our service?

These are questions that I would hope the preaching, teaching, and fellowship together bring you to ask on a weekly basis about your own walk with God. But they are also questions we need to also ask ourselves more intentionally as a community of Faith, as a church as a whole.

The governing body of the church - your session – is called to guide us as a church in our Christian commitment and in service. They have been working over the last months to reflect on who Calvary has been, where the Spirit has been, and is moving, and how they would state the practical values that ground this place.

Over this coming season in worship that we are calling “Dreams, Vision and Values”, I will be exploring these values with you more deeply in conversation with the scripture assigned for each week. Very briefly, the values that session has agreed ground our life here are:

- Nurturing the Spirit in and amongst us
- Building belonging
- Loving neighbor and creation

- Growing a community of diversity, courage and support.

The work session has done on these values offer some more particularly on what it means for Calvary to be God's church here on the plateau. And in the coming weeks, we will dig in a bit to what each really means, and we will ask you to dream with us. How do these values speak to you in the specificity of your own lives, and based on these values, what do you dream, practically speaking, for the future of Calvary?

We'll ask you to trust God's working in you to dream and to imagine and to respond. We'll collect your responses as you are willing to share, and these will help inform Session as they do their work to discern where are we going in this time and place as God's beloved community – a church that makes real God's presence in our world in the here and now.

Beloved, doing this work around the values that ground us and the specific future our mission and values engender in us, will, God willing, give us direction together as a church body. Hopefully, it will help others understand who we are and what we are about, and it will help us keep going when things get hard. This work together is about giving us a steadier foundation and providing a map, that will no doubt change and grow as we travel and learn more about ourselves and the world, but it is a map that will help us, as we go, to count the cost, and to discern together how to remain faithful when other things vie for priority. It's some of the practical work God calls us to.

Let's pray,

God, we ask your blessing on the work ahead. You ask for us to be clear-eyed and practical about the commitment we have made to you. Give us strength for the journey. Help us trust that you have already given us all that we need and will be with us enlivening our imagination and our trust in you and each other. Bless our desire to be part of your vision for more loving, peaceful and just ways of being your people now and into the future. Amen