

## Choose Life

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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September 8, 2013

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Every single day in the months of July and August, some Malawian would ask me, “So, what is it you are doing here?” And I would pause and smile and answer in my very best Chichewa language, “I am choosing life!” At first, they didn’t know what to make of this reply. In time, they came to see that I was making an intentional choice to rest, to claim those simple activities that restore my soul.

Moses gathered his extended family to his tent. He made it clear to them that they have choices to make everyday. Some choices lead to life; some to death. Then, he implored them with full body language, full spoken language, full volume: **CHOOSE LIFE!**

On this Homecoming Sunday, I picture Old Man Moses gathering the whole South Church family into his tent, getting everyone’s attention, then saying to each of us: children, teenagers, young adults, older adults, elders: ‘what would it mean for each of you to choose life, today?’ Because we do have this choice every day! I can picture Moses putting that question out there for us to ponder, to chew on. And then, after a few moments of silence, in that gravely, pastoral voice I imagine him to have had, we hear him say one last time, “South Church members and friends, Choose life.”

Most everyone knows the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The verse that jumps out at me this morning is the one that states:

‘he leads me beside still waters; **he restores my soul.**’

My soul is restored whenever I see anyone making a choice that is life-giving. In the absence of such choices, my soul tends to wither. One day this summer, two adolescent boys from my Peace Corps village came by and asked me to teach them how to throw and catch a Frisbee.

The three of us stood out on the soccer field tossing it around, having a grand time, laughing and giggling as the wind caused the disc to rise and fall with total unpredictability. After a while, some younger kids came along. They watched our play. They yearned for an invitation to join the game. I wondered what my two teenaged boys would do: chase them away or invite them in. They had a choice. They could say, “Choka! Scram!” Or they could say, “Bwerani! Come!” They chose to say, “Bwerani!” Those younger kids sprang to life, caught on to Frisbee tossing in two seconds, and multiplied the fun! In that moment of welcome, that moment of decision to include . . . my soul was restored. They chose life! And that was a blessing to me. Moses was smiling!

A few years ago, our Endowment Committee made a grant to a mission partner in Malawi known as SAMALA. This army of volunteers is intent on bringing the AIDS crisis to a screeching halt. They invited me to sit in on some of the support groups they’ve organized for women who had been infected and who had been actively participating in what we sometimes refer to as ‘the world’s oldest profession’. The SAMALA volunteers had organized these women to leave that life behind and to start up new businesses that would be life-giving instead of life-denying. These volunteers are motivated by their understanding of God’s love for all people. As I sat there in the support group, I listened to one story after another of a woman choosing life.

One had taken the small loan and bought bricks to make an oven. She was baking and selling scones, making enough money to send her children to school. One had used her loan to buy a goat.

She was selling the goat kids to her neighbors and making enough money to buy adequate food for her family. One had used the small loan to buy a bale of used clothing and was making enough money to buy metal sheets for a roof on her house. With small loans from a South Church Endowment Committee grant and with support from volunteers and from other infected women, these village women were choosing life! When the last story had been told, they burst into singing and clapping and then dancing! I thought to myself: so this is what it's like when people make that shift from choosing death to choosing life! I could hardly wait to get back here to tell you this story! Before I left that day, I surrendered all the money I had in my pocket to their loan fund; 10,000 kwacha, enough for another woman to imagine a better life.

Moses had called his family into his tent to give them this sermon because he had witnessed too many people making poor decisions, decisions that led to no good place, decisions that choked life rather than nurture life.

I have certainly made my share of poor decisions. I am the first to admit that! This is why Moses has become such a good friend of mine. He is like a parent to me, maybe a grandparent, maybe a pastor. Every once in awhile he calls me into his tent, sits me down, and says: Richard, every day God sets before you two choices: life and death. Choose life!

As I return from this recent sabbatical in Africa, it is becoming clear to me what it will mean for me to choose life.

+First, it means throwing myself into Confirmation education. I am so alive with 10<sup>th</sup> grade seekers!

+Second, it means plunging right into Bible studies with adults who are curious about ancient truths. I am so alive with these men and women!

+Third, it means rolling up my sleeves to work with all of you toward a long-range plan for the ministry and mission of South Church. I have energy for that now!

+Fourth, it means remembering that Jesus didn't have an office; that he encountered people where they work and study and live and celebrate and suffer. He was 'out there!' I look forward to being 'out there' meeting you where you are on your journey.

+Fifth, it means incorporating the concept of sabbatical into my weekly and monthly calendars, allowing time for solitude, for reflection, for reading and writing, and for finding my way into different cultural settings: a Jamaican restaurant, a Latino songfest, a Guatemalan art gallery, a Lakota sweat lodge, a Swedish meatball.

My goal now is to choose life every day! And my hope is that you all will do the same! Everyday, God places before us clear options. What I say is this: choose life! This I say in the greatest of hope. Amen!