

Choices, Choices

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The framed words hang on a hook near my front door: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” It was a gift to Randy and me at our wedding from the man who was my pastor during most of my childhood years. In our various apartments and houses, we have always hung it where it can be seen and read and remembered: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

They are the words of Joshua to the people of Israel as they renew the covenant the Lord God made with them. Joshua offers the people the opportunity to choose some other god to serve—for example, the god of their ancestors in the region of Mesopotamia from which Abraham had come, or the gods of Amorites, the peoples they recently defeated. But he makes a good case for choosing the Lord. They know who to choose. Joshua doesn’t need to remind them how the Lord God was faithful in all his promises, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, protecting them on their journey through the wilderness, giving them a land to call home. So, while *technically* Joshua tells the people they can choose any god, it is clear he doesn’t think there’s much of a contest here. There’s the faithful God who cares about his people. Then there are those other gods, who sure haven’t done what this God has done. The choice was obvious.

I wish all choices would be so obvious. Some of you know that I am not one for shopping. It has nothing to do with not wanting a new outfit or earrings or CD’s. It has everything to do with the dizzying array of choices I face every time I enter a store. With our family’s back-to-school shopping, even selecting socks or jeans becomes a challenge. Looking for socks? There’s crew, cuff, low-cut and no-shows. How about jeans? Boot cut, flared leg, slim leg, low rise, mid-rise, relaxed fit, stretch, skinny and carpenter. How to choose? What to choose? Just give me some jeans and socks, and let’s get out of the store! (I remember visiting Romania in the late 1970’s, during the height of Nicolai Ceasescu’s brutal communist regime. His repressive government wreaked havoc on the people of that land, but I have to admit that communism made shopping easier there. Say you went into a Romanian department store looking for an electric iron. In that store, you’d only **find** one type of electric iron. It was either that iron, or wrinkled clothing. The choice was obvious.)

In our Gospel lesson, when Peter and the disciples were confronted with a choice—when Jesus asked them, “Do you also wish to go away?”—Peter chooses, but I think it wasn’t that the choice was so obvious. I believe the choice was rather difficult to make. It wasn’t like it was with Joshua laying out before the people of Israel all the rational, reasonable, compelling reasons why they should serve the Lord God. He made the choice easy for them. No, by this time in the 6th chapter of John, people who once followed Jesus are now leaving him, because he is saying and doing things that are making them uncomfortable. Some of what he says doesn’t sound rational

or reasonable. They are offended with his language about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Not only does it sound like cannibalism, but there are the dietary regulations found in Hebrew scripture to consider. They state that state one never eats the flesh of an animal with the blood still in it, and you are strictly forbidden to drink blood. I can't say the people were leaving Jesus in droves—John doesn't indicate numbers—but it's apparent that many once willing to listen to and learn from and follow this Jesus prefer now to abandon ship.

The twelve disciples, his first and closest followers, have been watching all this occur, and have been unusually silent through this chapter. Until Jesus forces their hand and asks if they want to leave, too. But how to decide? What to choose? On the one hand, it's almost too late for the twelve to leave now. They've burned some bridges in order to follow Jesus—left behind their jobs, their families, their homes, and now maybe their reputations as well. But that still doesn't make the choice easy or obvious. The things Jesus says are hard to hear. And it's more than the "I am the living bread from heaven . . . whoever eats this bread will live forever . . ." language that they find difficult to accept. He's beginning to hint that he has been sent by God for a purpose, and the path he will take is for the sake of the world. He's beginning to talk in language of sacrifice—his own sacrifice—as the means to bring life. He's beginning to talk about the cross and his death on it. True, it's couched in other words, like this: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" and "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." But even couched in such language as that, Jesus' words indicate he is moving toward a goal no one following him would choose, and yet, if they follow him, there's every possibility they'll be dragged right along with him. When Peter summed up the disciples' choice in these words, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life . . ." you have to wonder if he recognized the danger he and the other disciples would face or the challenges that lay ahead. Do we recognize the challenges?

The writer Will Campbell recalls his baptism as a young boy in the East Fork River in Mississippi. His parents bought him a new suit for the occasion out of a Sears and Roebuck catalog. His older brother Joe, now at the age where he was more skeptical of religion, came along and stood by the bank of the river to watch the proceedings. A number of new Christians in front of Will were immersed, dunked, whatever you wish to term it, and Joe began to worry that this was a rather dangerous thing for his younger brother to undergo. Finally, Joe couldn't take it anymore. He slid down the muddy riverbank and grabbed his little brother, saying, "Will, dear God, don't let them do this to you. A fellow could get killed doing this."

Will Campbell reflected years later that that was precisely the point. Baptism—be it infant (with the parents making baptismal promises) or adult, be it sprinkling or immersion—is a radical act of obedience to God. It's the fork in the road, the point where you say "No" to the values of the culture and "yes" to the values of God's kingdom. Considering we are so inundated with the values of the culture, and often so enthralled by the world's ways, the choice of following the crowd or following Christ is certainly not easy or obvious.

Now if Jesus and I were having a conversation here, this is how it might go: "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus would ask. Well, let me think about that for awhile. "Do you also wish to go away?" Sometimes yes. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord . . . but it all depends

on my mood. It depends on how my day went. It depends upon the potential cost of that choice. It depends on a lot of things. Now, Jesus, let me ask **you** some questions, for—and tell us the truth here, Jesus, and please don't mince words—the truth is, if we follow you, will we find there's a tough road ahead? If so, **that's what makes the choice so difficult**. Are you going to tell us to pick up our cross and follow you? Or call us to live like you—selfless and giving—when with every fiber of our being we want to cater to our needs alone? Are you going to challenge us to bear good fruit in our daily words and deeds? Tell me, are you going to give us a new commandment? You know, like having to love one another the way you love us—YUCK! How can you expect **that of us**?

Well, our Lord **couldn't** expect that of us except that he's able and willing to prepare us for it. When we gather here and listen to our Lord Jesus, and then stand together and say the Apostles' Creed, the same creed spoken at our own baptisms, the very declaration that represents our “fork in the road” moment—one thing is clear. Following our Lord, being baptized in his name, means we become vulnerable and open and accessible to him. We've finally given up our incessant desire for control (that's our old nature dying away) and have become increasingly reliant on Jesus Christ (that's our new nature being formed in him). As well, we can receive the power of his Holy Spirit, and take up the weapons he has given to us to use on our journey.

Paul uses the militaristic image of donning a suit of armor, but the actual description of the weapons couldn't be further from the world's view of what makes a soldier strong. The weapons at our disposal derive from the nature and character of Christ—who made himself vulnerable and open and accessible to us. And these weapons, these pieces of armor don't hide us from the world, but render us vulnerable and open and accessible to it, so that we might be able to counter with love the evil that threaten God's children, so that we might shine the light of hope in some dark corner where it is most needed. What are these weapons? They are truthfulness, right behavior, peacemaking, faithfulness, trusting in God's Word and the diligent use of prayer. These are exactly the qualities our Lord possesses, and now, through baptism, **we** discover we have put on Christ, **we** wear his armor, and **he** will battle for us and in us and through us. **That's** how Jesus prepares us.

“Do you also wish to go away?” When Jesus asks his disciples that poignant, pointed question, he's really asking, “Do you trust me?” And that's a different sort of question. “Do you trust me?”

When you and I really listen to Jesus, we begin to hear the ultimate goodness in his words and recognize the pure love in his being. Then the choice becomes obvious. Then we can respond without reservation, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” **AMEN**.