

March 22, 2015 “Life Choices” Jeremiah 31:31-34 John 12:20-33 Psalm 51

Part of being human is the challenge of having choices. We cannot choose our parents, and we cannot choose – at least not yet – the genetic make-up of our children. But we do have all sorts of other choices. In our youth, we choose whether and when to obey our parents; how much effort to put into our schoolwork, how to treat others. Then comes the challenging choice of college; the choice of major; then career, and possibly, the choice of mate. When to have children, how to raise the children; where to live; how to spend money; how to spend any time not already taken up by necessities; when to visit our aging parents.. investments, which bills to pay when things are tight, whether to speed, whether to cheat. Every day asks us to make all sorts of decisions....

Choices... Somewhere in the midst of all the above-named choices are some really important ones. Do I believe in God? Is God important in my life? Am I a Christian? Will I live my life in such a way as to reflect my faith?

Today’s Gospel lesson shows us Jesus’ choice, to let his life be broken open, like a seed, in order for all of us to gain life and to receive the challenge to follow him. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the arrival of the Greeks at Passover, representing the wider world, was a sign to Jesus that his "hour had come" (v. 23, *RSV*). At that moment he had to choose between self-protection and self-offering. Jesus chose to sacrifice himself, like a grain of wheat falling to the ground. Through Jesus' example of triumphant self-sacrifice we learn that suffering is not necessarily something to be avoided at all costs. Suffering instead can “become one of God's most powerful tools for transformation. It is how God breaks open hard hearts so that they can be made new or "cracks open closed lives so that they can get some air into them again." "Sin met its match in Jesus" not because our sin-debt was paid, but because the power of redemptive suffering was released in the world. "Jesus died to fill the world with wheat, with so many sons and daughters of God that no one would ever want for bread again," Taylor asserts. "Each of us has a grain of wheat with which to cast our votes," she concludes. That grain of wheat is our lives. Will we choose the path of self-protection or Jesus' path of voluntary self-giving? (Quote found through *Lectionary Homiletics*, 2003)

One more thing to keep in mind, as our own “choices” are met by the words of today’s Gospel lesson: In verse 25, Jesus says that we must “hate” the world. It is helpful to remember what "world" signified for Gospel-writer John. It was symbolic language for the world-system that would secure its future apart from God. Those who "hate" their lives in this world system give up their stake in it, demonstrating their faith that it is God who secures our lives, that God is the most trustworthy aspect of human life. Jesus' freedom and joy in releasing his life is the freedom and joy of trust.

How easy it is to spend much of our life-energy being anxious, trying to keep things together, trying to protect our comforts, our health, our opportunities! Again and again I see that my spiritual life – my relationship with God – tends to be all too similar to my attitude in a car. For some reason, I am totally tense in a car, whether I am driving or riding. If I am driving, I live in fear of making a mistake and hurting someone. I am always imagining that the other guy is not going to stop at the

light, or that the person talking on the cell phone is going to pull right out in front of me, or that a deer is just waiting for my car to show up... I don't trust myself or others....And if I am the passenger, I tend to be even worse, certain that the driver hasn't thought about all those bad things I have and therefore will be totally unprepared to deal with them when they happen! I ride along, wincing, praying, mentally ducking, hoping to get home safely.

I don't treat God much better. I may try to put a heavy concern in God's hands, and may believe, somewhere in my heart, that God is able to handle it much better than I am, but then I usually jerk the concern right back to put it into my "anxiety slot," so that I do not find my rest in God.

The Psalm we shared today asks God to "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (Ps. 51) In Jeremiah, chapter 31, we heard God proclaim that God was going to do a new thing, even to write his love on our hearts... In Jesus, God did this.

Jesus came to make the choice to put God's ways above his own, to lay down his life in love and forgiveness, even for people who were not understanding or appreciating what he was doing, so that we could learn for ourselves that to gain life we need to be willing to trust God enough to let go of it for the sake of someone else.

A woman had worked hard for her entire life, and finally turned 65. She had been looking forward to retirement for years, living for the day when she would no longer have to work. But when she retired, the days quickly seemed long, and she found herself feeling emptier and emptier. She had some friends, but there were only so many lunch dates and fun outings to enjoy before she more and more lifeless. This woman was a church-goer, so she went to see her pastor. She told him how disappointed she was with her life now that she was retired, and how her life no longer seemed to be worth much. It just so happened that another church member had become ill about the same time, and was in need of someone to help him get around. After prayer, the pastor suggested that the woman might give some of her time to helping this man. The woman was not so sure about dealing with some elderly, deaf man she did not even know, but she somewhat reluctantly agreed to give it a try. She went to the man's house the first day feeling very unsure about it, but as she saw his needs, she found within herself new strength. She helped that man for months, until he died, and then was given a new assignment, and then another, and another... When this woman died at the age of 88, very few people remembered where she had worked in her early years, but testimony after testimony was given about her compassionate ministry with those in the community and her church who had needed her assistance. It turned out that for twenty-two years, this woman had laid aside her retirement plans and helped out in over 100 situations. She died "full" of life.

Every day, we have choices. Grab whatever life we can eke out for ourselves, or ask God how God would have us live today. In the video study we had last year, John Ortberg suggested that when we see another person in need, we ask, "Can I help you?" While we may ask the person this, the one we really ask is God.... "God, can I help share your love with this person right now? Please show me how." (*God Is Closer Than You Think*) Every moment, our choices open us to the life God has for us or close us off from it. May we choose life as we follow, with our hearts, our Lord Jesus. Amen.