

**“Whose Choice is it, Anyway?”**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – September 4 – Luke 14:25-33/C**

“Choose this day” was the phrase that Moses uttered as his ministry was coming to a close and the people of Israel who had wandered with him in the desert for 40 years were poised to enter The Promised Land. He had first reminded them of God’s promises and God’s Law, given to him on the mountain to order the community around God and not just themselves. For those of us who hear this story, it seems pretty obvious what was the best choice before them. One door was marked “life and prosperity” and the other, “death and adversity.” (I told you it seemed simple...) Moses even warned them that they could be lead astray if they did not pay attention - that the Promised Land was just over the next rise – and that it could be a slippery slope if they were not intentional about their next move: **Choose Life** was what he hoped they would do; **Choose Life** was God’s desire for them, but **Choose Life** also had the expectation that their abundance and their obedience would go hand in hand. There would be no loopholes to escape devotion to God. There would be No free ride to riches. There would be no cheap grace. Freedom and obedience have been linked since Creation, and those who do not hear **Choose Life** as a double-edge sword, are not listening closely.

Today, there is no way to even hear the word **choice** without assuming it describes a particular mindset. So, whether you consider yourself pro-life or pro-choice (as if they were mutually exclusive) I want to remind you that **choice** just might have been what has gotten us into the mess we’ve made of our lives and our planet. Where God intended freedom of the will to be used wisely to benefit all, we humans have taken it on as a right rather than a privilege – and are now bound by choice whether we want to admit it or not.

We love to think we are free. We love to picture ourselves as rugged individuals who are responsible for ourselves and have every right to do whatever we want to do. These days we have even dropped the next phrase which used to come on the heels of “I can do whatever I want...*as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody.*” Those days are gone. My way or the highway seems to be taking over the land. And most of us – if we are honest – hate that. We really want to be able to choose for ourselves – whether the choice itself is good or bad. We really don’t want to have to trust others to choose for us. But imagine the cost of that.

Case in point: most of us did not choose to be baptized into the Kingdom of God – but I would suggest that your presence here today speaks loudly that that choice was, for you, ultimately a good one, (though made by someone else.) You might even be thankful for it, because Holy Baptism is at the very root of our identity, which we really are not capable of fully claiming for ourselves until long after the sacrament is administered and the cross of Christ is imposed upon our tiny foreheads. Hold that thought...I’ll come back to it.

For the last few weeks, the story has been set during a dinner to which Jesus had been invited by a Pharisee – a colleagues in the religious life of Israel. Now, you know what happens at a dinner with your peers. First you check in, then you might inquire as to what’s going on with your meal-mates’ families. You move on to commentary on the state of things: jobs, politics, the church, the world. Finally, you can move into discussion of greater ideas – larger topics – interesting things you might learn from one another. Philosophy, the spiritual realm, faith, music/literature/art. It was at this level of conversation when the crowd of followers (presumably near enough to overhear the table talk) were addressed directly by Jesus with a choice he was placing before them, as well as the dinner guests.

The crowd was not puzzled; and had probably not been considering any life changes at that moment. ***You shall have no other gods before Me*** had been abundantly clear to generations of Jews, with no updates or rewrites. But Jesus was calling for dangerous changes, challenging the status quo, urging them to action. He has just arrived at dinner having broken the rules again, and healing on Sabbath. He has chastised their arrogance and told them where to sit. He has even told them who to invite to their own parties. So, try not to be too surprised when today's words from Jesus cut, sting and surprise us – for they are difficult to swallow, and even more difficult to follow.

Imagine how the crowd heard Jesus' reminder of the First Commandment. For Jews, family **was** their connection to God. But Jesus is saying that if your family, your tribe, your own life distracts you or comes before God, ***“you cannot be my disciples.”*** If that's not enough to get our attention, he adds, “whoever does not carry the cross and follow me...***cannot be my disciple.***” How is this a Christian message? How can this be coming from Jesus? Are you surprised that following Jesus is not for the fainthearted? Especially when he reveals his passion for God's claim on the world, he does not mince words and he is serious about wanting us to turn away, detach from, have nothing to do with, anything that gets in the way of his mission to finish the business with the world God so loves. So we must not turn away from the phrase that stings us the most, *“none of you can be my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.”*

So how does that sound? Hate your family. Carry a cross behind Jesus on the way to death. Invest your lives and all your resources in the kingdom. Choose life seems pretty far away from that description. And yet, don't be fooled. Putting God first has always been the terms of the agreement, for that is how your family receives blessings and land and length of days.

Today we are poised looking across the river at the Promised Land. Just like the children of Israel, we are going to be moving away from our 40 years building community, from the wilderness years in declining religious culture and a global pandemic, and the comfort of long-established leadership. This Gospel today is what we call “special Luke” because it is information that appears only here in Luke, and calls for us to pay particular attention to what it has to say. Because Jesus is sharing his expectations, as if he has asked each of us, “Now that God has chosen you; how will you choose to live?”

Investing your resources for something you believe in is not about personal lifestyle preferences nor voluntary poverty. Investing in what you believe in is ***abundant life***. Do you think that 40 years ago anyone cared about what color the paint and carpet would be in this sanctuary? Do you imagine that everyone agreed on how the worship would evolve or if that pastor would be male or female, LGBTQ+ or from (heaven forbid) California?! Do you think they decided **not** to commit to this vision because they weren't sure what God wanted at the corner of 151<sup>st</sup> and Quivira? No! None of those individual and personal choices were as important as doing what they were doing - listening, praying and resourcing what God and they had dreamed. ***We want to build a church.*** Not just for ourselves, but for our children and our children's children and our community. Choose life.

Which brings us to the cost of our choosing life. A great cost, when we accept that by trusting in Jesus, we are no longer our own. A huge cost to us, and in fact, one we cannot pay. We'd like to, but in today's story, Jesus is pretty clear that, “you cannot; you are **NOT ABLE.**” The Greek word is *dynamai*, where we get the word “dynamite” and it means “power.” Jesus says, “You have no power to be my disciple!” You can't do it! Because Jesus

knows you can't give up your stuff, and he knows you can't walk away from your family and he knows that you can't give up your control! But he also knows that God DOES have the power. And God has chosen YOU, so now you can Choose Life.

First and foremost, being a disciple means following Jesus, which means believing in God's vision for the world, as Jesus did. We used to ask the questions, "*Why should I be saved? What's in it for me?*" and answer, "*The promise of heaven and eternal life with those who have gone before us.*" But as author Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "*It's not sin and grace that draws today; it's the search for meaning in a purposeless existence.*" Choose Life.

It all starts here, at this font, in Holy Baptism, where we die to our old selves, and are raised to new life in Christ and we "impose" a cross, in oil, on the forehead of the newly baptized. Think about what it means to begin discipleship with "imposition" – which can mean "to put or place on something," or "to force, or foist upon!" The cross of Jesus Christ was **imposed** on you at your baptism, and from that moment on, you were not your own.

But how perfect is it that the primary symbol of our faith, the cross, is **imposed**? And just like the cross of oil at baptism, a cross of ashes will be traced on the exact same spot each Ash Wednesday with the words, "*Remember that you are dust, and into dust you shall return.*" Luther describes this irony, "*We are at the same time saint and sinner.*" Or for today, we might describe it as, "*we are obedient to that which sets us free.*"

Pastor Peter Marty tells a story of a 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi who gave this "life advice" to those seeking balance between these two aspects of life: Place two notes in two different pockets, and make sure you read them both every day. The first should read, "**You are precious in my sight**" and the other, "**I am dust and ashes.**" Discipleship grows as we remember just who we are, and even when we are who we are, that we are not our own. It is not easy to trust. It is not cheap to surrender. And still God chooses us so that we can choose life. Amen.

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**Resources:** Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Working Preacher* online; Barbara Brown Taylor, *Festival of Homiletics* lecture; "Choose Life – as a Disciple of Jesus" 9.9.2007; "We Are Not Our Own" 9.5.2010; "Unfinished Business" 9.8.2018.