

Making Choices in Community

Proper 16 b

Josh.24.1-2a,14-18 Jn.6.60-69

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Spring Hill, FL

22 August 2021

Today is the last of a series of readings that we've been hearing for several weeks from John's sixth chapter on the "Bread of Life." And it presents us with an interesting paradox about life with God.

Jesus has finished his sayings about coming down from heaven to be the bread of life for the world. And some who hear him are having trouble with it. In fact, some have had trouble with it all along.

"This is a hard saying," they say to each other. "Who can listen to it?" Yet Jesus keeps pressing, keeps trying to stretch their faith.

In the end, it's just too much for some of them, and our text says, "After this, many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." They walk away from Jesus.

Then Jesus turns to the twelve. "Do you also wish to go away?" It's time to choose. "How do you choose," he asks them. Peter responds pretty quickly, saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" In other words, "Where else do we turn?" "You have the words of eternal life," he says.

It's not the first time that the people of God had been asked to make choices. Joshua does the same thing in the first lesson. He assembles all the people of Israel -- who have by now conquered the Promised Land and inherited not only the land, but a whole host of pagan religions and gods to go with it.

"It's time to choose," Joshua tells them. "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Choosing is what our lessons are about today. Choosing between false gods and the true God. Choosing between false piety and true faith. Choosing between the flesh and spirit, as Jesus describes it in the gospel.

Choosing has not lost its fashion. Christians are still facing choices today -- choosing between the flesh and the spirit, between the bad and the good, between this world's definition of the good life and Christ's definition. Choosing is where the battle lines are drawn today, and we see it regularly in the news. But I'm here to tell you, it's not just now. It's always been that way.

There's a funny thing about choosing as a Christian, though. And this is the paradox I was talking about at the beginning. Choosing is something that we have to do all alone. Choosing is an activity that only one can do. Sure, we might make the same choice as others, but essentially it is our own choice, made by ourselves.

And yet, when we do choose -- and choose for the true God -- we are no longer alone. All choosing henceforth is choosing with the support and prayers and love of all the people of God surrounding you.

One pastor and theologian put it this way when he was describing the difference between being alone and being in the fellowship of the Church.

Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out....

But the reverse is also true.... Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ.

-- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.77.

You are all baptized Christians. And you are Christian by choice. At your baptism or at your confirmation, you made the choice yourself between the false gods and the true God.

And, let me tell you, the greatest gift that you have received for your choice is the Church. The greatest gift that you could ever have on this earth is this community of believers, right here. Because this body, this fellowship, this church is the very Body of Christ -- the place where the Spirit dwells, the place where Christ's living presence is found.

And I'm not talking about this building. This building could fall down tomorrow, and there would still be Holy Cross Lutheran Church. Did we not discover that during the year that our building was closed because of the pandemic? There was still a Holy Cross Lutheran Church. Because you are the Church. You are the living Church, the living Body of Christ. And that counts for a whole lot in a world filled with awful choices to make.

It means that you will never again be alone. It means that there are people here who care for you. And that means that God cares for you, because he has given these people and this fellowship to you. It means that when you've got problems and choices to make, then there are people there to help you and support you and pray for you.

In 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul says, "If one member suffers, [then] all suffer together; if one member is honored, [then] all rejoice together" (12:26). You know that it is true. Some of you have suffered in this past year. Maybe losing a loved one. Maybe facing health problems or family problems. Maybe facing difficult choices in your life.

Thank God, you stayed connected to the church! This is where you belong. In this fellowship. Because this is where you find your strength and support to go on. Your God is here in Word and Sacrament to give you strength. Your God is here in all of these people who love you and are praying for you and are ready to lend a helping hand.

Some of you have had great joys come into your life. And we all shared your joy. Just like St. Paul said, when there are joys, we all rejoice together.

I really hope you understand all of this, because being a part of a community of believers is just about the most important thing in your faith life. You can do a lot of things alone -- you can pray alone, you can read alone, and worship alone, and talk to God alone, make decisions alone, make choices alone. In fact you can live your whole life alone if you really want to.

But I'll tell you what you can't do alone. You can't be a Christian alone. You can't be a Christian by yourself. Because all of Christianity -- all that Christ taught us -- is about being in relationship. In relationship with God and in relationship with one another and our neighbor, whether that person is the needy person at the Food Pantry or the person who is there to help you. All that Christ taught is about how you are linked.

Holy Communion really ties all this together, I hope you know. Every time we come to the table, we are bonded to Christ and bonded to one another. Whether we do that here in the church or do that online through our website, we are bonded to Christ and bonded to one another. That strengthens us as the Body of Christ in this place. That makes us individually stronger and stronger as a church.

We need that. We need each other. We need the Church as we live our lives of awful choices. We need all the support that we can get. And this is where we get it. At the font. At the pulpit. And at the table.

Be sure to tell others about this whenever you talk about the Church. Tell them about what God gives you here. Tell them about the joys of having others there when you need them. Tell them how God loves you through them. Tell them how God nurtures your life through his Word and Sacraments and through this community of faith. Tell them about Christ who is the bread of life for you and for them.

And then thank God each day for this gift of Christian community that he blesses you with.