



Choose Wisely
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-33
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We all can tell stories of choices made out of entitlement with little regard to the common good.

We go through life making choices. And some of us pray to God we make the right one.

Moses presented the people with choices. It's pedagogical, democratic, and ethical to let people choose. People feel valued, included, respected, and trusted. They can make their best decision for themselves according to their knowledge, values, and emotional intelligence. When an issue comes up, people may choose one way or the other, or they may decide to sit it out. Not making a decision about something is still choosing.

A little boy came home from the playground with a bloody nose, black eye, and torn clothing. It was obvious he'd been in a bad fight and lost. While his father was patching him up, he asked his son what happened. "Well, Dad," said the boy, "I challenged Larry to a duel. And, you know, I gave him his choice of weapons." "Uh-huh," said the father, "that seems fair." "I know, but I never thought he'd choose his big sister!"

People are expected to make educated choices. If it's not inherently obvious that the choice for life is better than the choice for death, Moses adds motivational clauses: if you make this choice, you will live and multiply, you will enjoy many years in the land, God will bless you, your children will live. And in addition to the positive reinforcement, Moses includes the negative consequences for choosing poorly: you will be destroyed, you will not live long in the land. Why would anyone willingly or consciously choose death?

It sounds simple, right? But as you and I know, it takes constant alertness and commitment. I do want to always choose life and I also want to love God and hold on to God's teachings and desires for me all the time. But that choice does not come automatically, it's not a given. It's still a choice to be made, consciously, radically, and repeatedly.

Trust in God is what keeps us connected to the love of God, to God's healing Word, and to the nurturing life of the Spirit. But how easy it is for us to get distracted, pulled away, confused, and lost. How easy it is to be shaken when suffering comes, when spiritual challenges strain our resolve, when life overwhelms us, and when God seems so far away, silent, and absent. This is when the rubber hits the road and faith gets tested. This is when a Christian's job is to endure and persevere. Faith can't be given for granted; it is a treasure to be cherished and protected.

Believing God exists is not the same as trusting the God who exists. Just as believing in God is not the same as believing God. The journey of faith takes us from an initial perception of the existence of Someone out there, distant, above and beyond us, somewhat involved with us, to a much more intimate relationship where one will sense God's closeness, God's indwelling, God's union with self and all of creation. The journey of faith takes one from obeying God out of fear

to obeying God out of love; from experiencing God as domineering and tyrannical to enjoying God as a loving, freeing, and life affirming Parent.

It is possible to lose faith altogether. If our faith is personal and isolated from any significant Christian fellowship (it isn't enough for one to *go* to church – one must *be* church, together with other fellow believers); if it has remained shallow, hardly practiced, and just a matter of habit; if it is not developed through study and prayer, service and worship, a disruption of the habit (e.g., a prolonged time away from church due to an illness, a life altering event, or a devastating experience), may cause one to lose heart and fall into deep depression. Lack of motivation might make one question the usefulness of participating in community life.

Once that point is reached, one will look for any substitute to faith practices because the innate longing for the divine will need to be satisfied one way or the other. Choices get made that excite at the moment but do not bring life in the long run and may carry one further away from God.

Yet, if losing faith is a matter of shedding one's childish faith for a mature one, then let it happen. It is healthy and necessary. Holding on to childish faith is mortal in the long run. Letting go of this kind of faith for a more mature one will bring resurrection and new life.

A faith that can pray: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."¹ a faith that can pass, and even find strength in, the most formidable of life's tests; a faith that endures the darkest moments of the soul and perseveres through persecution and abandonment, is very welcome and creates the foundation for a strong spiritual life. This kind of faith will sustain us even when we do not perceive that God cares or watches over us.

God can use all sorts of life crisis to topple our idols, including but not limited to the idols of health and wealth, and a childish belief that God is there available to us like a vending machine whenever we remember or need something. God can clear the way for us to embrace genuine trust in Christ. And once we do, we are called to do it over and over again.

The practice of the faith requires consistent discipline. Persistence and endurance are virtues to be cultivated. Trust and wisdom, foresight and compassion will develop as we grow in intimate relationship with the Lord.

All those spiritual tools will be available to us when we need inspiration during a difficult conversation with someone, or while life decisions need to be taken, or when in traffic, or when being criticized, or while doing errands, et cetera. We can choose life by hugging a neighbor who is grieving. We can choose life by falling to our knees in prayer. We can choose life by sharing food, by offering a helping hand, by loving those who are difficult to love.

God's advice to the people in the desert to choose life over death sounds way too easy. Who wouldn't? But it's clear that God knows people all too well. God knows there are temptations in life, and that people harden their heart and rebel to God's will. God is aware that people easily forget the vision, and turn their back on God, seeking what is easy and pleasurable.

Choosing between life and death is not always that clear and the choice still requires wisdom and discernment, and even guidance from the Holy Spirit. No, not all choices are clear cut and people need to exercise discernment. Honest conversations based on facts and a sincere desire to advance the common good are part of the discerning process. A certain dose of humility and a

¹ Luke 22:42

willingness to practice respectful listening will also help. Hard decisions require prayer and a peaceful heart: no decision needs ever to be made in haste and with a troubled spirit.

In today's gospel, the crowds surrounding Jesus form the potential pool of those who might 'follow' him closely for the long run. Jesus wants to impress on potential disciples the cost involved in following him.

Weirdly enough, the Prince of Peace, who commands us to love our enemies, talks about hating family members and life itself.² How can that be? What's missing in translation? Do we need to be aware of cultural and historical nuances that could make Jesus' puzzling words more comprehensible?

The Greek word for "hate" (μισέω) does indicate emotional antipathy and strong disregard for someone. Thus, Jesus is calling his disciples to negate family affections and to re-examine one's loyalty to family. Now, there are families where family members hate each other and are not on speaking terms without any help from Jesus. Please, don't say Jesus made you do that: that's hardly what I think Jesus is calling us to do.

Jesus spoke his hard words about "hating" one's family in a cultural context where the extended family was the source of a person's security and stability. Jewish families in first century Palestine were self-sustaining economic units. No one in their right mind would leave such a unit behind in order to follow a homeless, controversial preacher into some uncertain future.

I think those shocking sayings are meant to stop us in our tracks and have us think about the importance of the commitment to becoming students of Jesus: they are meant for serious inner work and transformation. Christianity is neither a soul's entertainment platform nor a free ride to heaven. The life of faith is not a weekend hobby or a vacation destination. It's a full soul, full body, full mind endeavor that requires renunciation, surrender, and a reordering of our identities, our priorities, and our appetites. It requires "hating" what is too narrow, too exclusive, and too insular, and learning instead to love what is broad, inclusive, and boundless.

Last week's gospel (Luke 14:1.7-14), where Jesus helped banquet guests to think about self-importance, boundaries of honor, social stratification, and positioning, will serve us well. If the kingdom of God and loyalty to Jesus are going to reshape and redirect relationships, then even traditional family ties are going to be strained by the demands of discipleship. Prioritizing him over family members does not mean neglecting or abusing them. On the contrary, it means loving them in a new way, with a new heart, the way Jesus would love them. Jesus is not seeking emotional aggression against our family, but rather he is implying that we cannot learn from him unless we are willing to make him first in our lives. It is through him that we have a better shot at loving them well.

A clue to how Jesus wants us to love one another including our families is in the line that closes today's passage: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." (v. 33) He is talking about hatred, he is talking about discernment and shrewd calculations, and then he concludes with the request to "give up all your possessions." Why?

² Many 'anti-family' sayings sprinkled through Luke's gospel. See Luke 8:19-21; 9:52-69; 12:51-53; 18:29; 21:16.

Jesus does not want us to treat one another as “*possessions*.” He does not want us to relate to others in condescending, servile, utilitarian, and exploitative manners. How often we give people for granted and forget they are around, human beings in need of our attention and care?

Or, conversely, how many relationships are overbearing, controlling, and obsessive? How many times have we seen people fused to one another in codependent relationships? Self-differentiation is a balancing act. To what extent must we let go of someone in order to love them? Sometimes, we can love someone so much that we make an idol of them or seek to live vicariously through them or attach too much of our worth to the relationship. Buddhism teaches the need for detachment. To what extent must we detach ourselves in order to fully love?

When we enter into an “I-Thou” relationship with people rather than an “I-It” one, to borrow Martin Buber terminology,³ we honor their precious existence, relate to them in ethical ways, and value their humanity. We communicate that they, too, matter, and they matter to us.

Hating a *selfish* life, just to amplify Jesus’ thought, will mean to deny ourselves harmful behaviors that will sooner or later cause spiritual, emotional, relational, if not even physical pain. Jesus is not against pleasure. Jesus is against self-destructive pleasure.

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie once shared a story during the course of an interview: A large, multi-cabined ship sets sail across the ocean. A passenger whose cabin is on the lowest level of the ship decides to dig a hole in the floor of his cabin. Sure enough, the ship begins to sink. When the other passengers realize what’s happening, they rush to the man’s cabin. “What are you doing?!” they yell. The man looks up from the hole and says, “It’s my cabin. I paid for it.”

The parable is, of course, hyperbolic. But it names the same uncomfortable truth Jesus names in today’s Gospel: When it comes to the life of faith, we want to embrace a Christianity that doesn’t involve costly choices. We want to drift along as we always have. We want to experience Jesus the healer, Jesus the savior, Jesus the friend but not so much Jesus the radical, counter-cultural prophet who barges into our private cabins and asks the impudent, unbearable question: “What are you doing?!”

Jesus’ kingdom ways will ultimately help us to create a new sense of responsibility, a new awareness, new social relationships and families. He proposes ties that extend beyond blood lines.⁴ But there are choices to be made.

If I want to follow Jesus, I need to give up all my possessions, all my certainties, all my securities. I have to relinquish once and for all the fantasy that, “It’s my cabin. I paid for it.” There is no “my cabin.” I’m on God’s ship now, and everything I do, every choice I make, every tribalism I cherish, every idol I worship, every possession I hoard affects the entire vessel. I’m called to give all that up. There is no “us” or “them” on the ship of Christian discipleship. There is only a holy Body, wanted, designed, and shaped by God, more universal, all embracing, and fragile than I can imagine. Jesus’s claim on my life is radical and absolute; it relativizes every other claim. The choices we make, including the choice not to choose, need to be made with our neighbors in mind, and that includes all of God’s creation. May we honor God as we navigate life following in the path of Jesus, may we choose life. Amen.

³ Martin Buber was an Austrian Jewish and Israeli philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism centered on the distinction between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship.

⁴ Luke 8:20-21. See the new household of faith: Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; including Romans 8:35-39.