

Sermon for Sunday, November 11, 2012 "Choices"

One of the reasons why I am happy to be an Episcopalian is that our theology is based upon the expectation that we are able to use our brains as we explore our relationship with God. We don't just get a laundry list of what we are expected to believe and how we are expected to act. This is not a recipe book version of Christianity. We are supposed to learn and grow and think and wrestle as we try and figure out how we live our Christian faith.

It's a harder way, of course. It means we have to work at it, think about it, question it. We have to discern, and then make a choice of some sort.

The scripture passages we just heard share something in common: in each case, someone thinks about their situation and about what God wants, and makes a choice.

In the Old Testament, Naomi was with Ruth, the young woman who had married her son. That son was now dead, but the young woman chose to remain with her. But how would they survive? Widowed women struggled in that society. They needed to be connected to a man, either a relative or a new husband. Naomi and Ruth had returned to Israel, and Naomi had a plan: get Ruth remarried, to a distant cousin, Boaz. Boaz was wealthy and unmarried, and could take care of them both. So Naomi came up with a plan to introduce Ruth to Boaz. Ruth had a choice of whether to agree to this strategy, of course, regardless of the dire straits they were in. But she agreed with her mother-in-law's plan. She made a choice, and said, "All that you tell me, I will do."

She discerned what was the right path, and followed it. She made a choice.

In the Gospel, Jesus told a story of other choices: the Pharisees and the scribes chose not to listen to Jesus' message. Why? Most likely because it would require them to relinquish their old ways, ways that had given them power and authority. They craved the feeling that the power gave them – they were important, someone to be paid due respect. And so when they taught in the temple, they behaved in a way that reinforced their superiority and helped make them rich. But in Jesus' story, He posed another kind of choice. He pointed out a poor woman, a widow, who came into the temple. She wasn't anyone who would be noticed, much less acknowledged, by everyone else in the room. She quietly moved to the place where donations were accepted, and put a few small coins into the basket. Certainly, it wasn't the sort of donation that anyone there really thought was impressive, because it was so small, just the equivalent of a penny. She didn't put it there because she was worried about what people thought of her – if anything, she may have thought, "Well, this will confirm their belief that I am less than nothing because I cannot give much money." But she made the choice to do something, even if it was a small thing, because she felt it was the right thing for her to do.

Perhaps that choice meant that for that particular week, she wouldn't be able to buy enough flour to make the bread. It was, as Jesus said, something that she gave that cost her something. It wasn't like a big donation from someone who was wealthy, for whom the donation didn't require much thought or personal loss. It was doing something because it was what the Lord required of her, not something that she could do and not really think twice about.

That is one of the really interesting things about being in relationship with God: each and every day we make choices that can bring us closer to God. Some choices are easier ones: we choose to wear a cross around our necks to remind us of Him. We choose to be members of this parish, which feeds our hearts and souls and minds. Some choices are not so easy: we choose to cook a meal for the homeless, even though they seem a little scary sometimes. We choose to get up on a Sunday morning to come to church when it would be easier to stay home in our pajamas, reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. We choose to challenge a friend when he says something that belittles someone else. Those choices have a cost, be it risking interaction with people who make us uncomfortable, losing sleep on the one day of the week when we can sleep in, or taking a chance that our friend will be angry with us for challenging his views.

It is not easy, this business of choosing. If we do it right, as Jesus asks us to do, it will inevitably cost us something, and not just in dollars and cents.

It starts with the choice to believe in Jesus, in His death and resurrection, in His love for us and presence in our lives. Some people won't understand that, but once we choose to believe, it is virtually impossible to not believe. Doubts? Yes, we can have doubt. But total lack of belief, it is no longer possible.

Then it moves to choices that shape our lives, our way of living in the world. That may entail ethical choices, living simply, giving to those who need a hand. And such choices may seem ridiculous to others. Why give money away, when it is so hard to earn? Why do the right thing, when doing the wrong thing seems to be acceptable in so many places? Why live simply if you can afford to have some luxuries? But the choices we make have the power to turn us further away from Jesus and bring us closer to him. Why would we choose to do what turns us from the greatest love we can possibly now?

In our lives as members of this parish we also continually face choices: how to discern the ministries in which we participate, how to allocate resources effectively to support those ministries, who will lead and who will support the many things we do. We try to make wise choices, ones congruent with our deepest Christian values. Sometimes we are on target, sometimes we make mistakes.

But we know that whatever our choices, they are guided by the wisest teacher we could imagine. And that is a good thing, because we never stop making choices, as individuals and as a parish family. We ask His guidance today, in our daily lives and as we prepare for our annual congregational meeting, for the information we share and the decisions we make. May God's blessing be upon us as we do the work of bringing the reign of God to this little corner of Creation.

Amen.