

Message
May 23-24, 2009
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19
Choices
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Recently, I met a man and his wife with a very demanding schedule. She's practicing law, and he's just retiring from the Marines, and pursuing a new vocation. Together, they have a young son, many ambitions and goals for their life together. So, to keep life organized and as uncomplicated as possible, they have made the proverbial list and post it on the refrigerator. Now, their list looks a little bit different than other lists I've seen. About one third of the way down the list is what this young man calls a "happy line". He explains it this way: everything below the "happy line" might or might not bring joy. Below the happy line are things listed like: paint the living room, exercise more, plant a garden, learn to ski, and read more novels. Everything above the "happy line" says something like: offer thanks, say, I'm sorry, accept forgiveness, use my gifts, love God, be an encourager, pray, trust, make a difference. The list serves as a reminder of choices he and his wife want to live by.

A choice is our right, our liberty to select from options available to us, what is best for action. Making choices is usually a good thing. Sometimes, choices aren't easy. Other times they're not what we expected. Sometimes, we have too many choices. In the preschool the children are always given choices; but limited choices. They can choose to go the art station, the sand table or the block station. Pick one and be active in one. When completed, you may choose another station if you like. The benefit being that we grow in maturity in our responses with the possibilities placed before us. Choices make us who we are, they form us. Next week ten newest members will be welcomed into the body of Christ through the sacrament of Baptism. Parents and sponsors, along with all who witness, are choosing to raise these young people in the life of the church, showered in the grace of God's love and mercy. These parents and sponsors, with full intention, are choosing to model for their children, turning from those parts of us that draw us away from God and embracing those practices that turn us toward God. Sometimes, choices call for sacrifice that produces surprising results. I'm learning from the youth that they've decided that for 40 days, they're drinking nothing but water. For every day they choose to not drink soda, or milk, or juice, they put a dollar in the bucket. Their goal is to raise enough money to dig a well in Africa so people can have clean drinking water. Sometimes the choice is a struggle. For everyone, the choices are different. What's the right choice for one may well not be the right choice for another. When talking about choices this week, a dedicated, mother shared her dilemma of choices. She knew she needed to trim the rose bushes; they were scraggly and in danger of not blooming if not cut back. But, her precious daughter was standing in the driveway hoping to play basketball with her mom. The mom chose basketball. Choices are things we act on. Possibilities and promises bloom from choices. This Memorial Day weekend in particular, we're reminded of the thousands of dedicated women and men who have chosen to serve our country protecting freedom, maintaining peace, and providing

assistance and help around the world. They've made a noble choice and for this we give thanks. Choices are made in times of great tension, challenge and doubt.

Today we sit in what's known as a "significant pause" (Karl Barth). We've all experienced significant pauses: those times in life where we move from the familiar to the unfamiliar; where we live with trust in faith and truth. This is where the disciples are today. Not just the 12. But, in our lesson from Acts, it seems that Peter is preaching to as many as 120 faithful. It's a liminal period; a time of change and most probably, an anxious time. It's a challenging time; a significant pause, a time of transition. It's been some days since Jesus raising his arms, blessing the disciples, ascends to heaven. Judas has died a gruesome death leaving them one disciple short, which means more work for the remaining 11. Now, they haven't forgotten Jesus' words, "you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit...and be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth." Ok, a big task. They're ready to make the choice, to go, to be the church. But, they're kind of hoping the Holy Spirit is going to show up to pull the trigger and that hasn't happened yet.

Now, these faithful men and women are believers. A believer is someone who doesn't just know about Jesus. A believer is someone who knows Jesus, someone who experiences the living presence of Jesus. These believers, wanting to live out what they know to be true, they fall back, regroup, and grab hold of what is most familiar and secure for them. So, they turn to scripture and honor its mandate: *Let someone else take over his office*. They make plans to get another apostle on board. So, they pray, "Lord, you can read everyone's heart, show us therefore which of these you have chosen." Not yet filled with the Holy Spirit to guide them in their choosing, they do what is most familiar to them. They depend on the power of prayer and cast lots. Casting lots is the typical way all duties and offices in the Temple are resolved. The names of two qualified candidates, Bar-sab-bas Justus and Matthias are written onto small stone tablets and placed into a jar. After a good shaking, the jar is tipped releasing one stone. Matthais is elected. It's the right choice. The leadership team of twelve is complete. All having met the criteria for apostleship: you must be an eye witness to the Lord Jesus from the time of John the Baptist to his ascension. Now, they're ready, waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and never again will they have to resort to the ancient tradition of casting lots to determine choices.

See these 120, they may well be the total number of believers on the planet! Probably, most of them have never been outside of the greater Jerusalem area. Now, they've got the message; to share the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth! That's going to take some considerable trust and faith. Think about it. Today, it's estimated that about 1/3 of our population of 3 billion call ourselves Christians. If our mission efforts have anything to say about it, my guess is that these 1/3 will get to the other 2/3s of the world. And while 120 may not seem like much to get the good news to the ends of the earth, in first century Palestine, 120 is enough. According to Jewish law, 120 are required to plant a church, a "legitimate community". The power of the Holy Spirit will guide them and equip them from now on. But, that's a story for next week.

This week, in this 17th chapter of John from which we hear today, Jesus shifts into deep prayer mode, pausing to ask God to ready his church for living out their mission to be his people in the world. Jesus chooses three significant prayers of promise and hope. He prays first for himself, to be glorified in God so that in him, all may know the eternal love of God. Next he prays for his disciples. There's a huge choice unfolding. The world believes it doesn't need God; that a relationship with God is just not necessary. Protect them and keep them true to your name, he prays. So, lastly, Jesus prays for the Church and it's mission to live in the unity of God in Christ. As he sits at the table, his disciples intimately gathered round him, having shared their final meal together, Jesus is slowing the pace just a bit. He's teaching them about the choices they will have before them.

Jesus tells them, they'll be persecuted and hated for their choice in following him. He reassures. "Trust in God. Ask and it will be given. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. Remain in my love...and the Spirit of truth will come and you will be my witnesses. There will be weeping and wailing...you will be sorrowful. But your sorrow will turn to joy. In a short time...you will see that I live and you also will live. Be courageous." Jesus' last words before going to the cross.

He tells them, God, in Christ has made the choice. ***The choice is us.*** *We are set apart, consecrated, made holy.* Jesus, dedicates us to God, to do God's work in the world. We're the ones who live in truth, the reality that we live our lives grounded in the love of God in Christ. And, in making the choice to live in truth, we're reminded that choices centered on the love of Jesus Christ are grounded in integrity and sincerity.

Last week I had the privilege of spending some time with a young woman who is a highly accomplished hurdle runner. Hurdle running, as you know, is the most challenging of running competitions. It requires muscle power integrated with speed and the grace to clear a 36" hurdle every 50 feet or so. My friend has spent years training and running hurdles. She knows how to push off with a burst at the starting gate. She paces herself, counting her strides between each hurdle. She knows that clearing the hurdle at the right height is critical to seconds gained or mishaps. So, last week, she had a big race and she felt really good about her level of competency with the race. Coming round the track, she sprinted with great speed and at each hurdle, she leaped across as gracefully as a deer. About two thirds through the race, she saw that she was going to make some significant choices. She sensed as she neared the hurdle that her timing was off. She approached the hurdle and chose to take it, with the hopes that she'd correct herself. Taking the jump, she knew immediately that her right foot was turned downward just enough to catch the hurdle. She hit the hurdle, and collapsed in a heap taking the hurdle down with her. She checked to make sure she had no serious injuries. The fall destroyed her timing and her rank in the competition. The crowd would have easily understood had she walked off the track. Instead, my heroic young friend chose a different route. She stood up, paused, brushed herself off and returned to her running, finishing the race. We make choices; some better than others. Our choices, lead us to places of change, newness. My young friend, in sharing her story, discovered a new kind of victory in her choice.

I imagine that many of us, maybe all of us have times in our life when we're at a significant pause; at a time of change, of choice making where we trust, in the power of the risen Lord, the one who comes to save us and bring us into new life, new possibilities, in the love of God. Of course we want to hold tight to what we know best. That's what makes us feel most safe. But, things can't stay the same. The apostles know that, and so do we. So, we move through the change, trusting and relying always in the redeeming love of Christ Jesus. Jesus prays for our choice to be him; to be his followers; trusting in his love and forgiveness in us, making his joy complete! We are his, set apart, consecrated in the truth, to be about his mission in the world.

We make choices. How do we know they're good choices? We ask Jesus. We say our prayers. And like the apostles, we turn to our faith community. We seek out the wisdom of others. We know we've made a good choice when our actions are loving; our words are patient and kind; when we're willing to speak words of forgiveness. Here's what else good choices do: they free us up to be all we're supposed to be. Good choices keep us focused and centered to stay on the right track. Good choices unite us one to another, and, most of all, to Jesus.

So, I imagine, maybe today, or tomorrow, Memorial Day, as we're enjoying some Sabbath rest and time of re-creation, we'll be making our lists. Go ahead and make it. But this week, I challenge you to make some choices. Draw your happy line on your list. What's on your list above the happy line? Maybe it looks something like: live deep within our heart; work for justice, freedom and peace, reach out to comfort, be foolish enough to make a difference. Here's a #1 great choice: choose Jesus.