

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 25-26, 2018

Readings: Joshua 24: 1-2A, 15-17, 18B; Ephesians 5:21-32, or 5: 2A, 25-32; John 6: 60-69

Preacher: Christine Nowak

A popular strategy for parenting toddlers is to offer them concrete choices. For example, “We’re about to go into the parking lot. Do you want to hold my hand or do you want me to pick you up?” As is so often the case, being a toddler isn’t all that different from being an adult (I get just as “hangry” as my 21 month old!). In almost every moment of our day, we are presented with choices—sometimes simple, sometimes complex—and must make a decision about how to respond.

This Sunday’s first reading and Gospel put forth profound choices. (Note: I am making the deliberate choice to go nowhere near the second reading. If only the compilers of the lectionary had done the same!) In his farewell message to the people he has led into the Promised Land, Joshua asks the Israelites if they will choose to serve God. At the conclusion of the bread of life discourse, Jesus asks his disciples if they will choose to leave or to follow him.

Looking at these Scripture readings in isolation, it can seem as though this is a one-time choice. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Done. End of story. But this is definitely not the case, nor is it the end of the story. The same Israelites who chose to serve God at the end of the book of Joshua, fall into idolatry in the second chapter of Judges. Peter, who proclaims his faith in Jesus so strongly in John chapter 6, denies even knowing him in John chapter 18.

The atrocity of clerical sexual abuse, brought to our attention again in recent days by the horrific findings of the investigation in Pennsylvania, is another, more abhorrent example that choosing God once does not make for a life of faith. Although they dedicated their lives to the service of God at the time of their ordinations, the priests who abused children and the bishops who covered up their crimes inflicted pain and suffering on God’s people. Again and again, they chose evil and sin rather than God.

However, as indignant as I am and as harshly as I judge the hundreds of men who took advantage of their ecclesial power to hurt innocent children, I am reminded that I too have power and my actions also hurt others. To be clear, I am in no way giving a “pass” to abusive priests and corrupt bishops simply because we are all sinners. Nor am I equating my sinful choices to their evil actions. However, it is important to acknowledge that I also misuse my power of choice. I buy clothes that are made by workers who are exploited. I spend my time and money on Netflix rather than in service to those in desperate need. I snap at my husband, fail to show compassion to my cranky toddler, and beg off calling my parents because I’m tired. I eat meat that comes from animals that are mistreated. I read articles on my new iPhone about children separated from their parents at the border, but I don’t use that same phone to call my elected officials demanding action. I say that I am a believer and a disciple, but I don’t always choose accordingly.

The bottom line is that even after we have made the choice to serve God and follow Jesus, we are presented with situations every day that require us to choose whether or not we will *live out* that decision. And, just as was the case for the Israelites and the disciples, many times we make the wrong choice.

The Good News is that our God is loving, merciful, and patient. God sent judges to deliver the Israelites from the power of their enemies even after they worshiped other gods. The last chapter of John’s Gospel describes Jesus compassionately prompting Peter to affirm the love for Jesus that he had previously denied. As we reflect on the Gospel each week, we are reminded that out of love for humanity, God gave us Jesus to bring us into closer relationship with God and one another. And as we face decisions in our daily lives, we see that God keeps giving us chances to follow Jesus’ example.

No matter how many times we make the wrong choice, God keeps offering us opportunities to do better. As we grow in our recognition of and response to these opportunities, we come to share in the eternal life our generous God invites us to choose over and over again. Let’s choose wisely.