

Sermon: Pentecost 14

The Rev. Mike Wernick

August 26, 2018

Year B

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84:1-6

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

From Deuteronomy 30:19: *I have set before you life and death... blessings and curses... choose life so that you and your descendants may live... and from Joshua 24:15... Choose this day whom you will serve... whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River... or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living... but as for me and my household... we will serve the Lord...*

We all make choices... every day... plenty of choices... some seem to be pretty much inconsequential... like what to have for lunch... but if we follow the ingredients of that turkey and cheese sandwich back to their origins... we may find inhumane animal treatment... herbicide and pesticide use... and GMOs... other choices are far weightier from the get-go... and some of us procrastinate... and put some choices off... for as long as we can... but they are all choices nonetheless...

Sometimes our choices morph into habits... and while we continue to make them... we don't even think about them... and after a while... they don't even seem like choices... but may seem like narrow passageways into which we have been forced...

For example... we choose whether to get up out of bed in the morning and go to work... we choose when to do the laundry... we choose to have that fourth slice of pizza or that second piece of pie... we choose to speed up just when the traffic light turns yellow or not to come to a full stop at a STOP sign... [ask Barb Cottrell's granddaughter how that worked out for her...] we choose whether to give a few dollars to the man or woman standing at the intersection... and we choose whether to let how we feel determine how we act... these are all choices... choices enabled by the free will gifted to us by God...

and informed... to varying degrees... by having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil... by being able to make moral choices...

And we use all kinds of reasons to rationalize why we choose to do what we do... or choose not to do them... I need my church family to lift me up today... I'm running late for an appointment and anyway... no one's at the intersection... that pecan pie's so delicious and I don't know there'll be more... I'm tired and they don't appreciate me at work and anyway I have a sick day I can use... if they're begging on the street they must really be in dire straits... they must really feel forced... into a narrow passageway...

We make choices... we like to think that it ought to be easy... that the gift of free will... given freely by God... ought to enable us to evaluate every situation independently... on it's own merits... to be objective... but quantum physics tells us... there is no such thing as objectivity... everything is subjective... to some degree... everything is dependent on everything else... everything informs everything else... we do not exist in a vacuum... and we do not miss God's mark for us... by ourselves...

Alma Tinoco Ruiz... a United Methodist minister and student at Duke Divinity School... writes... *in most Christian traditions... when people commit sin they are treated as autonomous individuals fully conscious and responsible for their own thoughts... motivations... and actions... people who have willfully decided to disobey God... it is left to individuals to try to exert their free will and resist the devil's temptations... often the individual is accused of having weak faith... of not being strong enough to resist the power of sin...*

However... as New Testament scholar Susan Grove Eastman points out in... Paul and the Person... *the self is never on its own... but is always socially and cosmically... in relationship to external realities... [which] operate internally as well... sin is not then... "a decision made by self-determining individuals... but rather a socially mediated power*

greater than human beings... yet operative through human thoughts... words... and deeds...

In Exodus 33 : Moses said... *Show me your glory... I pray...* and God said... *I will make all my goodness pass before you... but you cannot see my face... for no one shall see me and live...* and God put Moses in the cleft of a rock... and covered Moses with God's hand until God passed by... and then Moses saw God's back...

Pastor Martin Billmeier wrote... that glimpse is fleeting... Moses doesn't get to see God's face coming towards him... but the lesson of the story... is that we... like Moses... get to experience how God transforms us... through our experiences of God... we can see God's presence in hindsight... after God has passed by...

[And] Solomon knew that neither heaven... nor the highest heaven... much less the Temple he had built... could contain God... likewise... he knew that this boundless God was the God of all people... and asked God to hear the prayers of foreigners... who would come because of God's unnamable name...

St. Anselm said... *God is that... of which no greater... can be conceived...* meaning not that God is the greatest thing I can conceive... but rather... that God is greater than anything I can conceive... and theologian Peter Rollins expressed it this way... *God is that... about which nothing can be said... yet God is that... about which... we should never stop speaking...* that's why the conversations must continue... because God cares far more about corporate sin... and less about individual sin... so religion ought to be far more about transformation in the here and now... and less about salvation in the hereafter...

In just the last week or so... religion and politics have increasingly been in the cross hairs... the Pennsylvania Grand Jury's report of sexual abuse has rocked not just the Roman Catholic church... but Christendom in general... and convictions in the Paul

Manafort case... guilty pleas by Michael Cohen... and the immunity that's been granted in just the last several days... have many of us wondering what's next... but when we choose to worship the finite gods of fame... or money... or power... or authority... when we choose to worship the gods our ancestors served... we are not serving the God who is greater than anything we can conceive...

Bp. Satterlee shared a video on Tuesday... made by Pennsylvania Bp. Michael Rhyne... who requested our prayers for the victims of this corporate sin of sexual abuse... and for all those who have been hurt by these revelations... that the process of healing for them may begin... and for us to pray for our Catholic sisters and brothers... whose hearts are breaking for their church... that's partly why Safeguarding God's Children and Safeguarding God's People training have been made available to church leadership and other volunteers... so we can create a culture of awareness... and prevention...

In this week's political and religious revelations... there are many different kinds of responses we can choose... complaining... rejection... disbelief... minimizing... and acceptance... and today's Gospel is like that... is like the parable of the seeds planted on different kinds of soil... with different kinds of results... and today's Gospel describes some of the ways people respond to Christ... the different responses we can choose... there is complaining in v. 61... rejection in v. 66... disbelief [and the first reference to Judas] in v. 64... and a confession of faith in v. 69...

The Book of Numbers recounts... in ch 12 v.3... that Moses... *was more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth*... Moses did not follow the false gods beyond the River... he did not follow the gods of power and riches... the same gods... about whom we heard last Sunday... that Solomon rejected... he did not follow the god of the false self... Moses sought the I AM... the Ground of Being... the Spirit... which gave life to the flesh... the clay... the *adam*... that's why Jesus said... *It is the spirit that gives life... the flesh is useless*...

In the Eucharist... we consume bread and wine... the mystical body and blood of Christ... so he can abide in us... and we in him... our faith calls us to consume Jesus' death and resurrection too... so he can take our pain and suffering... and create in us compassionate hearts... hearts which suffer with others... and we too will become capable of reflecting only God's light... and like Moses who learned about God in hindsight... and like Jacob... who wrestled with God... we too will be renamed... and after we have been transformed... by Jesus' words... which are spirit and life...

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