



Choosing Jesus

February 17, 2019

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5-13; Luke 6:17-26

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

Choices. Simple matters. What to eat or wear. What to read or watch. What to buy. Sometimes simpler choices can become complicated. On one of our first dates Suzanne and I shopped for black shoes, for me. Two possibilities—assessing aesthetics and ethics of cost. All of \$10 difference, as I recall. An hour later, she knew what she was getting into. 26 years later she's patiently still with me.

Choices. Harder, deeper decisions. How to have a purposeful life. Beyond making money. How to respond when unexpected opportunities arise, or when unsought realities demand attention. How to face unsettling ethical situations at work, in families, at church. What's best for all people and creation beyond our own desires or even needs alone. We make unending choices every day.

Simple matters and harder decisions inevitably entwine. As a quick question raises deeper concerns, at least a few layers of thinking shape our moral norms and ethical choices. First, principles—consciously expressed, or unconsciously presumed. Like: God wants us to create life together, so “do unto others...” and forgive, even love enemies. Or more practically don't touch a pot on the stove or stay inside when it's cold. From principles, rules arise like the Ten Commandments, or wash hands before eating. And then we face concrete situations in which we assess and act—like the Good Samaritan, or Nathan indicting David's adulterous pursuit of Bathsheba. Real trouble comes when in some situations we feel called us to go against rules to fulfill principles. Jesus healed on a Sabbath, breaking the fourth

commandment, to bring life as God intends. Or we grab that pot on the stove after cooking to get it cleaned. Then sometimes even principles are open to interpretation, like what is cold? Alabamans might be inside when Alaskans are sunbathing!ⁱ

Choices. Ethical situations and real life responses fill the Bible. That's what Jeremiah and Jesus imply, or cajole or warn—I wonder how we hear these readings. Blessings. Woes. Comfort? Challenge? They highlight God's priorities: how God wants our world; God's kingdom come and will done. Not always what we hear in popular wisdom or see in common experience. Question is: what are our priorities?

According to Luke, Jesus helps the disciples and us discern good choices. He informs, inspires, heals, models abundant life flourishing as God intends. Luke shares many good ideas about Jesus. I like good ideas—thinking and talking. And friends, we know ideas alone aren't enough to make a difference in lives of family, friends, acquaintances we care for; or with causes and concerns in our world. What's in our minds must make it to our words, hands, feet—to real living faith. Of course, that's when complications come. Distractions, anger, naïve complicity, selfish desires, fearful reaction. For better or worse, we make momentary choices and deeper decisions through the heart. So that's really what Luke tries to get us to do—to give our hearts to God, to remain close, to keep seeking Holy Love we know in Jesus Christ to guide our principles, rules, choices in every situation.

You see, that's what even the blessings and woes are really about—what helps or hinders giving our hearts to God. They're not cause and consequence equations. Blessedness doesn't mean blissful happiness with no concern. Woes aren't a curse or moral condemnation for anyone with a full belly, a smile on their face, or money in their pocket or bank account. They're observations and notices about who we are to be more than advice about precisely what we should do. That will come, of

course. And there are always fair questions to raise about our food, money, joyful leisure relative to others.

For Jesus, and all the Bible, our truest identity gets revealed in relationship with God. We are created in our deepest core with the goodness of Divine Love. We are sustained in life by never-ending Sacred Grace. We are called in life to cultivate fullness of Holy Peace. Do we know that divine presence? trust that sacred promise? give our hearts to that holy purpose? That's what Luke wants to define us. That's the choice above all choices, the commitment in all decisions Luke urges us to make. Blessed are we when life seems a bit rough. It will be clear we can't make it on our own. We need God and others. Beware when everything in life seems great. Lest we think we did it all on our own. And we expect, deserve everything to stay good while maybe we don't need God and others quite so much.

You know, some Christians preachers and writers promise that if we choose Jesus prosperity will follow, like herds of camels, a closet full of shoes, no cancer. That's not what Luke says; not his good news. As he tells the story, Jesus gets born under a dark cloud of threat from Herod and Caesar. In Jesus' first sermon to hometown friends and neighbors he proclaims God's favor—not only for them, but for foreigners, even enemies. They get so mad they try to throw him off a cliff. All along his way people curse, accuse, and plot against him. And of course, in the end, the cross. Execution. If we choose Jesus, know what we're getting into.

Jesus comes down from a mountain-top where he appointed the first apostles. He stands on a level place—level / equitable with all people, to level with them about this call. He looks into their eyes, the eyes of their hearts. He talks about persecution, hate, scorn sure to come if they stand with him, stride with him. Choices they face won't be easy. Living faith, we know, is hard. And here's the heart of Luke's good news about a blessed life. Mary, Joanna, other women stand

hopeless by his tomb, when they're urged go find Christ among the living. Cleopas and a friend walk toward Emmaus, when the risen Christ comes to inform, to inspire, to share a meal—real presence and power. Peace be with you, he says. Don't be afraid.

Friends, choosing Jesus like the first apostles means walking his way of loving compassion, standing with his true power of grace, embodying his life of service. As if he's right before, behind, beside, inside us. That's what it means when we stand here at the font with Jesus. With Cecilia Joy. With each one of us and anyone who wants God to be at the heart of life. God's loving presence claims us and seals the covenant we share! We live with resurrection hope and power, making new life real every day! We commit—we choose whom we will serve. And from here at the font we walk with Jesus into the world.

We make unending choices everyday. Simple matters, deeper decisions, entwining, often complicated. Friends, keep making one primary choice with an undivided heart. And so, know blessing—not perfect, never-anything-bad-happen-to-us bliss—deep blessing of love, wisdom, courage, hope, joy, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, generosity, peace. I wonder what your heart longs for in life right now.

Jeremiah imagines such a blessed life—that holy relationship—as if we're trees planted by a stream of living water roots reaching deep, soaking up nourishment we need. And just a few verses later in Luke, Jesus says: a good tree bears good fruit ... out of the abundance of the heart, we choose, we speak, we act. (Luke 6:45) A tree, roots in good soil, a flowing stream ... and here we have a font, looking more like a stump on a slate stone floor, bowl of water inside. I'm trying to figure out how this image connects! Help me, Jesus!

When I look into our living faith, here's what I see. Various shapes, sizes, colors of who we are like slate floor pieces sealed together. With bits broken, worn over the years. On that solid foundation, in that life, this holy tree trunk is planted and thrives. The highest branch, that all others aspire to reach is the cross we grip each time we open it to pour water, like the living water inside us all. And framing the whole experience is the promise: "this do in remembrance of me"—full of Jesus' loving presence, to empower Jesus' loving purposes.

Yes, when we stand here, friends, know what we're getting into. And remember, humbly, gratefully, we're able to choose this way of love, because God first loves us—in deeply personal ways and through people we know, who have branched out to us, rooted in generations of love gone before. So here we stand, where so many like us have stood before, grafted onto the great tree of Jesus Christ whose roots go all the way back to the banks of the Jordan River and the shores of Galilee.

Here we stand with children of God, in their first 90 days or at almost 90 years. Our children, our grandchildren, our friends and family in Christ. People we've come to live with, even love, simply through this church. Parents made a choice. As adults, on our own, we made a choice ... to turn to Jesus Christ trusting in him, more than all that may sinfully seduce and separate us from God.

Here we stand with our fear and anxieties. Our faltering bodies, slipping minds. Our broken relationships. Feeling loss of someone dear to us. And rising above sadness and despair, with hope, with Jesus, we choose to make love and joy grow evermore.

Here we stand with our failures, disappointments, poor choices and consequences, addictions and other struggles that face us in the mirror every day. And rising above cynicism and condemnation, with courage, with Jesus, we choose to make mercy and forgiveness grow evermore.

Here we stand with our ethical stress at work—the suspicious whispers and scornful looks. With our heightened concerns from news we hear or Facebook threads we read. And rising above vengeance and prejudice, with compassion, with Jesus, we choose to make grow evermore grace and a passion for what is fair and right in God’s vision of a blessed flourishing world.

Here we stand with Jesus (with Cecilia Joy, as if on cue!) on this level place, that we may go walk with Jesus in every place! Blessed are all who trust in the Lord!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Inspired by David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 64-69.