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# Making Choices

Rev. Sue Melrose



Sunday, November 12, 2023

“Making Choices”

Rev. Sue Melrose | Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Choices. Someone at some time said we make up to 35,000 choices a day! That is about one every couple of seconds. It means you have made choices just since I started this sermon – little, almost unconscious ones like whether to cross your legs or not. Closing your eyes just a little longer to help with the moisture. Deciding if you are going to keep on listening or just let your mind wander to whatever else is beckoning for your attention.

Some choices though are obvious—and may seem like no choice. I remember my dad describing a choice before him. He had enlisted in the army on January 1, 1941 – part of the build of the U.S. Armed Forces “just in case” the U.S. entered World War II. He was one of those young men who was a bit adrift during the Depression. After a couple of years of college, returning home to work in his dad’s garage, one of the first auto service garages in Oklahoma, he was hired to drive an elderly couple on the length of the just fully paved Route 66, veering off to see numerous sites along the way. He enlisted partly because he knew unmarried men like him were prime candidates for the draft, but also because he could have a bit of a choice to become a mechanic in an armored division. Do something he knew. On that first Sunday in December, he had papers before him. He had to make a choice: to enlist for another year and get to have leave at Christmas or leave the service and return home in the middle of January. Which one? The choice became clear when just before lunch he learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Go home for Christmas and return knowing that life was changing dramatically for in that room – not really any other choice to make.

I learned a lot about life choices from Nancy McGaughey. Nancy is a nurse and was for a long time a mission co-worker in Nepal when I knew her, later serving in the Sudan. She is an incredible witness to faith and commitment in one’s own life. Over the years I

have had several opportunities to be around Nancy. Though hers was a quiet and gentle manner, I was challenged—challenged in my assumptions about life and ministry and the meaning of discipleship. The congregation I served in Succasunna, New Jersey, sponsored her. Twice we hosted her when in the states on furlough. Isabel, a church member whose husband was preparing to summit Everest – and happened to be an ER doctor, was able to visit Nancy bringing a few medical supplies to the remote village of Jumbla where Nancy served – far, far from Katmandu – in fact a three days trek from the nearest road – unless you were lucky enough to catch a seat on the plane that flew there maybe once a week, which Isabel did.

I was very pleased a few years later when I had moved to a new call in Farmington Hills, Michigan, when I learned from the presbytery’s coordinator of the Month of Mission when some dozen or more missionaries would descend upon Detroit Presbytery and preach and teach in churches that we were being assigned a missionary by the name of Nancy McGaughey. Yes!

After worship in Michigan, she and I went out to lunch to the new Nepalese restaurant in town – Everest Express. I had been there once and asked Nancy if she was game for seeing if it was “authentic.”

As we ordered, Nancy began to speak to the waiter in Nepalese. His mouth dropped and he ran back to the kitchen, and soon, he and the owner/ cook were talking away with Nancy in a language completely foreign to me. Every so often one of the three would turn and interpret to me in English. What amazed them was not that she as an American had spent time in Nepal. They had known other Americans – tourist trekkers, Everest climbers, students. But she was very different from other Americans. I understood when she said “Jumbla,” her village name. Their mouths dropped. The owner said something like “That is out in the sticks!” He also told me she talks like a “country girl,” not someone who lived in Katmandu. He asked her, “Why choose there?”

Nancy had chosen a lifestyle as a Presbyterian Missionary doing health care, particularly nutrition and maternal care. Where that would be was more a decision of the PCUSA Mission Agency, although she certainly had input. Regardless her choice led her to the remotest part of one of the remotest countries of the world. That meant she had limited choices about what to eat—but it arose from the one big choice she had made about who she would serve. She limited other choices because of who she had chosen to serve.

But, for most of us, most of the time, our choices are unlimited: Too many choices whether items on the diner menu or electives to take in Middle School. Several years ago, Alvin Toffler in the now classic *Future Shock* warned that we are in a time of “the peril of the over-choice.” We have so many choices. And often it is befuddling, not knowing which way to go, paralyzed by over-choice.

Think of holding the television remote in your hand. Live TV and endless streaming options. Walk into Home Depot, Walmart, Costco. All of these are what a friend of mine called the “Stupor Stores.” That is for sure: I wander around aimlessly peeking down aisle by aisle wondering if that contains what I came after or will it be another. I get drawn into touching and considering things that have absolutely nothing to do with what it was that I came into get in the first place.

We have so many choices in simply choosing a church. A pastor tells the story of a couple who was visiting his church one Sunday and informed him that they were “shopping around for a church.” When he asked how long they had been church shopping, they answered, “For five years.” Five years and thirty churches. They added, “We just can’t decide on which one would be best for our needs.”

Over-choice easily leads into no choice.

And so it is that Joshua addresses the tribes of Israel. He gathers them all at Shechem to renew their covenant with the words, “Choose today whom you will serve.” Will you serve the God of Israel or one of the many gods, the many idols, which abound around you and your ancestors before you?

Joshua had led the Israelites into the Promised Land. They had crossed the Jordan, fought the battle of Jericho. They had been victorious to the north and to the south and began to claim the land as their own — dividing it up among the twelve tribes. But they did not totally obliterate the Canaanite, the Amorite culture, nor entirely forgotten the gods that their ancestors had worshipped before the One God established the covenant with Abraham and then with Moses at Sinai.

I must admit that a passage like this one from Joshua about the Promised Land and the battle between the people living there and the Hebrews is a hard one to read any time but especially in times like these. On the one hand, we can read of the battles and just shake our heads saying, “It has always been so violent there.” But the reality of the conflict is right before us. We know the claims of Zionism; we know the competing claims to land. We know of the Holocaust, the deep suffering of Palestinian refugees

on the West Bank and in Gaza, the absolute terror of Hamas, Israelis slaughtered and taken hostage, and ordinary Gazan civilians the very young and old alike killed as bombs explode around them. The list of the tragic and horrible for all the people who live in the region – all the people -- goes on and on. We feel deep anguish that pulls us first one way and then another as we ourselves cry out Peace, Peace – when there is no peace.

I find myself wondering daily what I can do here in Madison, Wisconsin, to support efforts for peace – and justice – and safety – and security for all. Right now, I do not know the answer any more than I am clear about the answer to the division and resulting paralysis in our own country. It is easy to surrender and turn away thinking we have no choice in the matter –or perhaps because all the choices are so very frightening. We are paralyzed.

But then we are pulled from our paralysis – from just ignoring things: elections happen and remind us that choices matters; a dear friend dying of cancer tells you about all the choices he is still making from what to do with all the stuff in the house to relationships he is working to heal; some have before them choices to re-enlist or not; choices to serve God in places far away and remote and right here among those we know. All made by those who did not ignore the choice but committed.

The early Hebrews lived in a culture of many choices. They had choices about which god or gods to worship—and there was one for every situation: one for sun, one for rain, one for fertility, one for the harvest, and there were the gods of their ancestors, the gods of tradition.

Some would wonder why not keep them all—like we keep the variety of brands and styles of everyday things. You never know when a god of rain and fertility will come in handy.

But, to assimilate was to have too many choices—befuddling, stupefying choices. As the poster I had in my college dorm room pronounces, “Not to decide was to decide.”

Joshua reminded the Hebrews as they gathered at Shechem: They and their ancestors have followed God’s call from Mesopotamia. God guided them from slavery in Egypt into freedom, through the desert wilderness, back into this land of milk and honey. They had promised to live by the covenant God has made—this God who has done such wonderful and marvelous things for them.

So, in this land of many gods and many choices, it is time to recommit: “Choose this

day whom you will serve.”

As Joshua announced that he and his family would choose God, forsaking all foreign gods, they all nodded their heads in assent. Now you may have expected Joshua to say, “Yes!” – and affirmation of their affirmation. Let the party begin!

But, no, he tells them, he reminds them that serving the Lord is hard, for he is a jealous God. Now jealous in this sense if not about intolerance or fanaticism—but it is reminding us that ours is a God who demands wholehearted commitment—who demands a decision for God and God alone.

And God demands no less for us. As confessing Christians, to choose God is to bear witness to the power of the Risen Christ in our lives. In many ways, each Sunday, each day is a recommitment to worship, to study, to pray, to serve with the giving of time, talent, and treasure. Choosing God is a choice that informs all the other choices of our lives – to choose peace, to choose justice, to choose forgiveness, to choose engagement, to choose life – to choose hope -- all the choices that follow from choosing God.

For, a choice is a decision. The word “decision” comes from the Latin words meaning “to cut.” One reason we often fail to decide is knowing that in deciding we are cutting off some options so that we can embrace others. That is true for us every single day of our lives. Some doors are closed when we choose to walk through others. The foreign gods are left behind—as enticing as they may be.

Today the choice is before us. Whom will we serve? It is the choice that is above all other choices. It is the choice from which all the other choices of life follow. It is the choice for God who is our Redeemer, the One who saves us through the power of the cross, the One who leads us through life’s journey, the One who brings us into the Promised Land, the God of hope.

Thanks be to God! Amen.