

March 17, 2019

Choices

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

One thing I've always found curious about human beings is that no matter how much we stray from God, we have this idea or picture of God as one who is just waiting for us to do something wrong so that he can punish us. That we want and choose to blame God, even when it's our choices that draw us away from God. Now I have a sense of why possibly we do that. I mean, we do see some hard words from God through God's people, from the prophets, about punishment and such.

If you read the Gospel according to Matthew, you will hear about the punishment for those who turn away from God. But again, it's almost like we want to blame God for all of this. And a matter of fact, I've heard God being blamed for the sinfulness of humanity many, many times in the years that I've been an ordained priest. Invariably, they will get around to, "Well, if God just didn't give us free will. Everything would have been fine!" So really, it's kind of God's fault. And humanity right from the very beginning has been very good at this blame thing. You know?

When God comes to Adam and Eve after they've eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. "Adam, did you eat this fruit?"

"Yes, Lord. Eve tempted me and made me do it."

"Is this right Eve?"

"Yes, but it was the serpent that tempted me and made me do it." We're very good at blaming anyone, anything else. But it comes down to choice and our choosing the way that we will walk. And if you really read the Scriptures, at least the way I read the Scriptures, it is God who is saddened by the choices that we have made. That God is not intent and certainly doesn't look forward to punishing anyone because God keeps giving us opportunities to be in a good or better relationship with God. And we still choose otherwise.

And seeing if you were listening to the Old Testament reading this morning, it got a little difficult. We had this thing about the animals being cut in half, and the smoke pot going through. That was the vision that Abram had of the Covenant that was being made between God and Abram.

It was God saying, "This is the deal, the Covenant that we are making. And it's being sealed in this ritual." But the Covenant itself is, "I will be your God. I will watch over you, I will take care of you, and you will have descents more than the sands on the shore. More than the stars in the sky. And all you have to do is choose to follow. Is choose to accept. Is choose to listen and to love me back." That's all there is to it. And Abram says, "I will do that." And then Abram didn't do that. Neither did Abraham's descendants. Abram became Abraham. Abraham's descendants don't follow any better than Abram really did. There was some there. He tried his best, and yet he could not do the simple thing. Humanity couldn't do the one thing that God asked them not to do. "Don't eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And there's consequences if you do."

In the Covenant that God made with Abraham and Abraham's descendants, follow this Covenant. Follow these laws. Listen to the prophets. How many chances do you want? All I want you to do is to follow in the way that I would have you. And it's all about the choosing to love and to care. Love and care for God, love and care for your fellow human beings. Really that simple. Okay. You want that defined? I'll give you some Commandments. I'll give you some laws that you can follow. Will that make it easier for you? Here are ten. Do these and we'll check back in with you later.

Well, they weren't terribly good at following the ten because they wanted to narrow it down. "What does this really mean?" And so, we go from ten to six hundred. Quite a leap. And all the time, God is saying, "But really love me. Love each other. Don't be so self-centered that you think you need all the resources, and all the control, and all the power. If you will simply allow me to take care of you, to love you, to give you the things that you need, and then be fair with one another. Care for one another. If someone has less than you do, help them out." If you have more, then you are blessed. That's great. Help somebody else out. You can choose to do that. And yet, over and over again we choose not to do that. If you listen to the prophets, what are they saying for God about the people?

You are not treating one another well. You're not treating the person who comes into your land well, the immigrant well. You are going against the very things that I have told you. You are choosing the opposite. Don't do that and things will be well. Continue to do that and you'll face the consequences. Because every choice has its consequence. Now to choose God, to choose to love, to choose to care, to choose to recognize the people around as brothers and sisters who deserve to be treated fairly, and with justice, and with mercy. If you choose to do that, will there be other people that take advantage of that? Yeah. Probably. The ones who choose not to follow my way. They may well try to take advantage of that.

But if you stay firm in that choice to love me and to love the people regardless of who they are, where they come from. Then all will be well with you. Your soul will be intact. And that's what we are striving for. That's what we are most concerned about. When we're afraid that we aren't living according to the way that God would have us live when we have made it so difficult in our own hearts and minds to live up to that, and we refuse to do it. Then we start getting a little concerned about, "Well, is God going to forgive me?" Well, yeah. God's going to forgive you if

you sincerely ask for forgiveness. If you choose to do that. If you choose to turn away. To repent, to turn around. If you choose to see the people around you as children of God. As citizens of God's kingdom. As worthy of your respect. No matter where they come from, no matter how they speak, no matter what the color of their skin. We can choose to do that. And that's what God is looking for. To make the choice that God wanted from the very beginning. To choose to be in that relationship with God. To choose to be God's child. To choose to be a citizen of God's kingdom, and to allow yourself to be taken care of by God.

That's the choice that God is looking for. And it sounds so simple, and yet when we start looking around and seeing not other brothers and sisters, but competitors. When we see that somebody might be getting more than my fair share, then we get worried. And so, we start making choices that don't live up to what God wants for us and from us. We start to choose to hold tighter to the things around us and to let go of the people around us.

In the Gospel reading for this morning, we hear again about God and Jesus not wanting to punish the people. Not looking for a way to push people away or to condemn them to something else. What is Jesus lamentation? "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. I've longed to gather your children like a hen gathers its brood." And you are not willing. We say we are. We say that's what we want. "I wanted to be gathered in by God, I want to feel protected by God. I want to be there in relationship with God, and know that God loves me, and to make God know that I love God."

And yet my willfulness, my need, and desire to have things my way begin to go against what God would have me do and be. Where I don't seek the same level of justice for others as I seek for myself. Where I choose not to live up to the very promise that I have made to God to respect the dignity of every human being. When I choose not to live up to the promise that I have made to God. To show by word and example. To share by word and example, the good news of God and Christ.

It's a choice. And it should be a very simple choice. But it is very difficult for us because of that part of us that just wants to have control. That wants to have more. That cares less about the people who have nothing than me having more than I need. God is not one who wants to punish. The Men's Breakfast Group has read a book ... we spent three weeks ... I'm pretty convinced it was because I was the one who was supposed to be teaching it. Three weeks we talked about God and punishment. God and the idea and understanding of Hell, and how those are compatible. And what it came down to was not that God is a God that chooses or wants to punish. Or to send anyone to that whatever your vision of Hell is. But it's about people making a choice to be separated from God, and that is the natural consequence of being separated from God.

Choose to be with God. Choose to follow as closely as you can. Choose to examine your life, and the decisions you make, and the things that you do. And see how that compares with God's call for us to respect the dignity of every human being. If you truly want to know where you stand with God, remember how you treat the least of those around you. Because that's what Jesus used to show the love of God and the relationship with God.

As much as you have done this to the least of these, you have done it to me. You have either fed the hungry or you have not. You've either given drink to the thirsty or you have not. You have either helped clothe the naked or you have not. You have visited the sick or you have not. You have visited those who were in prison or you have not. And prison isn't always just that physical thing. Too many of us are in prisons that we have created for ourselves. Choice. God gives it to us for a reason. Because we have the choice to love God or to not.

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