

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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October 15, 2017  
*6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Called to Life*  
Joshua 24:14-27

### Called to Choose

Isn't it ironic that the "chosen people" have to choose?

The Israelites had been "chosen" many generations before. When God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their ancestral land, and go to an unknown country, God promised to make of their descendants a great nation, to give them a land, AND through them, to bless all the families of the earth. The "chosen people" were chosen to be a light to the nations. And when God gave Moses the gift of the Law, the "chosen people" were chosen to show the world what it means to live in covenant with God. We affirm today that the Jews remain God's chosen people.

Yet in the early years of the Christian church, followers of Christ began to see that God's choice had expanded. Paul wrote to the Romans that "by no means" had God ended the covenant with the Jews, but in Christ, God had opened a new covenant with the Gentiles. (Romans 9-11) And the writer of 1 Peter told his persecuted audience of Christians, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) Christians since the first century have understood ourselves to be people who are chosen.

But when God chooses, it is always for a greater purpose. To be chosen is both gift and burden, calling and responsibility. The call demands a response. "I choose you," says God. "Will you choose me?"

And the biblical story shows us that this mutual choosing needs periodic renewal, not because God forgets the covenant, but because humans do. What this last chapter of the book of Joshua shows us is a covenant renewal ceremony. "God chose us," says Joshua. "Will you join me in choosing God?"

Well, the people respond, that seems like a no-brainer! Yeah, sure, we'll choose God. God has done great things for us. God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good, so why not? Blessings will rain down on us, life will be better. As for me and my household, we'll choose God, too.

But Joshua refuses such a quick response. I don't know if this is the origin, but Jewish tradition is that if a person comes to a rabbi asking to convert to Judaism, the rabbi is obligated to turn that person away three times. An aspiring convert has to be persistent, because he or she will hear "no" three times. Joshua tells the people that God is too holy for them, no they can't commit to such a holy God. He tells them that God is too jealous for them. He tells them that allegiance to God is too hard for them. You're here for the goodies, but if you say yes today and then stray from God, you'll feel it! Are you sure you want to choose God?

I wonder how many stuck with him through the challenges.

This is a week in our year of call when we admit that saying "yes" to God's call means making a serious commitment. One of the greatest gifts the Hebrew scriptures offer is their warning against idolatry, against making anything other than God ultimate in our lives. To serve the Lord means choosing 100% commitment, not just when it's convenient, or when it serves our purposes, or when it's the popular thing to do. For, as Joshua warns the tribes, God's name is "Jealous."

“Jealous?” you may be wondering. I thought God’s name was “Love.” Is this some kind of translation problem?

Well, some suggest that perhaps a better translation of this word is “zealous,” meaning that God is passionate about us, passionate about the covenant, passionate about being in relationship with humankind. All that, I believe to be true. But others say that “jealous” is the way the Hebrew scriptures show that this God is different from all the other competing gods in the world around them. In a world in which people plead with one god for a good harvest, and another for a fruitful marriage, and still another for fortune, the God of Israel is unique in his jealousy. Our God doesn’t want a portion of our devotion, he wants it all. And before anyone here jumps to the conclusion that this is the God of the Old Testament, that is, the outdated testament, remember what Jesus said is the first and greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, and ALL your soul, and ALL your strength, and ALL your mind. Our God is a jealous God, who doesn’t want to share us with other gods. There’s nothing outdated about that. For a covenant is an exclusive relationship. The tribes gathered at Shechem under Joshua’s leadership were told to put away their idols, if they really were committed to serving God and being God’s people.

Sometimes we think that commitment can be measured by our contribution to our church. A person who gives 10%, a tithe, is really committed. But what if that same person uses the other 90% in less than honorable ways? Maybe by cheating on their taxes. Maybe by being stingy toward their own family. Maybe by running a business which takes advantage of other people. Or maybe by spending money on frivolous or even unsavory purchases. God wants 100% commitment, not 10%. Every penny, every nickel, every dime which passes through our hands should honor God. So the discipline of tithing is a beginning, which helps us learn to devote all our material possessions to God.

Sometimes we think that commitment to God can be measured by time given to churchly activity. I did my part—I showed up on Sunday morning. The rest of the week is mine. But if the rest of the week is mean-spirited, if there’s little evidence in a person’s life that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control—what Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit—are growing in that person, then what good did Sunday morning do? God wants 100% commitment. Time given to God in worship and in a community of faith initiates that commitment. And even when that community of faith is the all-too-fallible, all-too-flawed church, it provides us accountability and companionship along the way. Since every minute, every hour, every day of life comes from God, God asks that every minute, every hour, every day of our lives give honor to God.

It all comes down to our choices, doesn’t it? We who are chosen are given freedom to choose. The big choices in life—what to do for work, where to live, whom to love—sometimes come as a result of many smaller choices. We can’t always control our life circumstances, and we never can control the choices that others make. But we can choose how to respond to life’s surprises and life’s unexpected challenges. We can choose the kind of person we will be, the attitude we will hold, the effort we will give, and the direction in which we will point our lives. We can choose our words and our actions. “Choose this day whom you will serve,” the ancient ritual challenges us. **The call to choose is a call to let all our choices be pervaded, and guided, by our love for God.** All our choices.

Isn’t it ironic that we who are chosen are called to choose?

That choice is illuminated by our Savior Jesus Christ, who also had to choose whom to serve.

I wish to close with thoughts from Howard Thurman, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest philosophers, spiritual writers, educators and civil rights leaders. In this "year of call," I have been drawn to his sermon on the temptation of Christ in the desert, the time when Jesus himself had to choose whom he would serve. Several times in this sermon, Thurman writes, "I love Jesus for the shaft of light that he throws across the pathway of those who seek to answer the question, "What shall I do with my life?"

The sermon concludes with this searching, reflective poem, which Jesus might have prayed in the desert, and in which we also can find ourselves.

Give me the courage to live!  
 Really live—not merely exist.  
 Live dangerously,  
 Scorning risk!  
 Live honestly,  
 Daring the truth—  
 Particularly the truth of myself!  
 Live resiliently—  
 Ever changing, ever growing, ever adapting.  
 Enduring the pain of change  
 As though 'twere the travail of birth.  
 Give me the courage to live.  
 Give me the strength to be free  
 And endure the burden of freedom  
 And the loneliness of those without chains;  
 Let me not be trapped by success,  
 Nor by failure, nor pleasure, nor grief,  
 Nor malice, nor praise, nor remorse!  
 Give me the courage to go on!  
 Facing all that waits on the trail—  
 Going eagerly, joyously on,  
 And paying my way as I go,  
 Without anger, or fear or regret  
 Taking what life gives,  
 Spending myself to the full,  
 Head high, spirit winged, like a god—  
 On. . . on. . . till the shadows draw close.  
 Then even when darkness shuts down,  
 And I go out alone, as I came,  
 Naked and blind as I came—  
 Even then, gracious God, hear my prayer:  
 Give me the courage to live!

(Wm. Placher, ed, 2005 *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 388-389)