

Lectionary 21B 2018, August 26, 2018, John 6:56-69, Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

The Good News message that I have tried to preach consistently and clearly over the years in this pulpit is the grace of God. This grace is not merely any grace; rather it is found only in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit calls us and gives us grace to believe that Jesus is for us. For you, personally. I belong to that line of Christian speaking about God that will insist that God chooses us long before we begin to think that we choose God. That's what I mean by grace. Grace is God choosing us, for Jesus' sake. Grace is God reaching into your life, choosing you, calling you and naming you beloved child.

And yet. In both the stories from Joshua and our gospel this morning we are told it is ours to choose. We arrive, with Joshua and the people of Israel, at a critical moment. Will you follow the LORD who brought you out of Egypt? Or will you follow the gods of your ancestors? You can't do both, Joshua says. You have to choose. One or the other. The people following Jesus also arrive at a critical moment. He finally makes clear what he means when he says, "I am the bread of life." To stay with Jesus means eating his flesh and drinking his blood. To stay with Jesus means getting the whole Jesus, body and soul, flesh and blood, all the words, the hard ones as well as the easy ones, the challenging words as well as the comforting words. The hard word and challenging word centers on Jesus himself being the way to the Father, home to God. Not just a way, one among many; but the way, the only way. "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?", some wonder. And it turns out some can't accept it. "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him," John tells us. Some of his own disciples could not swallow completely this bread Jesus was feeding them. This turning point prompts a dramatic moment when Jesus asks the twelve, "Well, what about you? Do you also wish to go away?" Do you choose to stay, or to go?

Yet again, when I look back on my life there are times when it seems like the choice was pretty clear. As though it wasn't mine to make at all.

I grew up in a semi-musical family. What I mean by that was my mother played the piano, and in her day she was pretty good. My father played the clarinet in junior high school which he gave up for high school football glory. But he still had that clarinet and he would bring it out once in a while and

play it for us. But my mother played the piano and a little electronic organ quite a bit. When I was old enough and sat at the piano and tried to plink out a tune she thought it was time for lessons. In fourth grade the music teacher at school offered us the chance to try a musical instrument and the opportunity to take lessons. I guess it was a choice for me to take up an instrument, but in reality it wasn't really a choice. Music and instruments were already present in our home. And while the trumpet I chose was not my father's clarinet and I never really continued on the piano, I wasn't intimidated by picking up an instrument and learning to play. And while I don't really play the trumpet much any more, I can't imagine a house or a world without music, which is an incredibly important part of my life. Did I choose? Or was I shaped and given experiences that led to a choice that wasn't really a choice after all?

It seems to me this is what Simon Peter is struggling with when he hears Jesus' demand to choose. For he responds by saying there really isn't a choice after all. "Lord, where else will we go? Who can we follow but you? You're the one who teaches us the way to eternal life. We find ourselves believing you are Holy One of God." Peter sees that some have chosen not to follow. But for him and the others they have arrived at a point where faith and trust in Jesus simply exists.

So in the end I expect that it a bit of both. God chooses us, calls us and gives us faith. Yet each day we are also called to choose how we will live out that faith, choose who we will serve on any given day.

So I am called to wonder as I begin each new day:

- Will I choose to live in kindness or choose to let old hurts and offenses taint the responses to those around me?
- Will I choose to live with a fence around my life, safe and secure in my compound, or will I respond to the calls and cries of those in need in my family, in my neighborhood, or in my world?
- Will I work for justice in the world for those unfairly discriminated against or will I be silent for fear of giving offense?
- Will I live generously and give a significant portion of what I have in response to God's grace or will I hold on to as much as I can because I fear the future?
- Will I begin and end each day in prayer or will I try to go it alone?

So, with Joshua and Peter we are asked to choose each day “who we will serve...who it is we will follow.” And it’s an important choice. This being so, I thank God that God has already made the ultimate choice for us in giving to us Jesus Christ his Son. For all the daily choices we make are made under a benevolent canopy of grace. We are already chosen, for Jesus’ sake. We are already called, already brought into the household of grace, already adopted as sons and daughters and sit at this fine table feasting on the very Word of Life. Amen.