

"Fences Aren't Made for Sitting"

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Mark 10:17-25
Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus
April 27, 2014—2nd Sunday of Easter—Rev. Ronald Botts

"Choose life," our Old Testament reading for the morning tells us. Choose life over the pull of death, even when it's hard. Take heaven over hell. Decide on what builds up rather than tears down.

Our text says, "See, I have set before you this day life and prosperity [over against] death and adversity. "...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him...."

In these verses today we have life's most basic choice laid out before us. We do not choose our parents nor our time to be born or our country or the circumstances of our early life. We do not choose to die, nor generally the time or conditions of our death.

Yet, in between our beginning and our end, we have the power to choose how we shall live; whether it be courageously or in cowardice, honorably or shamefully, with purpose or without. **We** decide what is important and what is trivial in life. **We** determine what we do or refuse to do. And as we decide and choose, our lives are formed.

In the Bible the question is posed frequently about how a person shall live, reminding us that we can't come down on the side of both good and evil, heaven and hell, blessing and curse. We may try to straddle this fence, but inevitably we must fall one way or the other. The choice is ours to make.

Within this tension we find the story of a man who comes to Jesus one day, a man of wealth, asking what he must do to gain eternal life. Now it's understandable to see this request as having to do with the afterlife, but the Greek word for "eternal" means literally "the time to come." And I rather think that this broader dimension is what Jesus had in mind with his reply. The eternal life that the man comes seeking is something fulfilled in tomorrow, but it can begin today... if so chosen.

This "now and later" dimension of eternal life is like a couple planning to get married. They dream ahead to when they will be together, and by so doing, they enter into some of that happiness right now. Or take a family building their dream home. Even before the house is completed, their anticipation lets them begin to enjoy what the future will bring more fully.

So, too, Jesus introduces a bit of eternal life into this life. It can start to be experienced right now, if we opt to seek it.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"You know the commandments..."

"I have kept all these since my youth."

"There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and give your money away to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Unfortunately this man was very rich and so he was disappointed to hear what he needed to do. He steps back from Jesus because it is more than he is prepared for. He expected some sacrifice on his part, but not this. What he is told that he will have to do threatens both his identity and security.

Jesus looked into the man's soul that day and saw that money was the most important thing for him in life. Christ's words make it clear that a person can have only one thing at the core of his or her life. Unfortunately for this fellow, wealth held the top hand.

In truth, though, the issue in the story is not money. For another person the obstacle to a full life could be power, or pride, or possessions, or any of dozens of other things. It could be career or a hobby or even an all-consuming relationship. Almost anything can occupy the center of our being. Whatever is most important to us becomes our god and then the God of the Universe is pushed aside.

We can hear Jesus pressing the man about the base upon which his life is built. "If it's wealth," he might have said, "you can lose that in a minute. If it's fame, that's fleeting at best. If it's possessions, they can go up in smoke. As to those kinds of things, when they're gone, they're gone; then what are you left with? You see, I'm giving you the opportunity to choose life over death, meaning over emptiness, real security over false hope."

In this possible conversation the man might reply back to Jesus that this is hard to accept. To do what he asks would take a radical change in thought and practice. "How can I undo what it's taken me years to build up? How can I give up what I know for something I've yet to experience? What if you're wrong? What if I do what you say and give away all my money and then I find there is nothing to fill the void? How can I chance it?"

And the reply: "Friend, I can't decide that for you. I can only tell you what's true, what you came to learn when you sought me out. But this I promise: if you rid yourself of the false security that forms your faith now, I will show you how to rebuild your life so that you will be transformed completely. Trust me. I won't let you down. Trust me. I won't leave you."

Jesus tells us that whatever blocks a person from moving ahead must be pushed aside in order to go forward. There has to be a willingness to relinquish the lesser way of living in order to receive something greater. To do that we have to get off the fence, and it can sometimes be very hard. We can become rather comfortable in life even when we aren't satisfied. It may be difficult to redirect ourselves because this takes effort and there are so many competing choices for our allegiance.

In Sylvia Plath's novel "The Bell Jar," the narrator uses the metaphor of a fig tree to symbolize the possibilities that life holds for her. The tree branches out in many directions and at the end of each is a tempting fruit. One fig represents a happy home and children, another a productive career as an educator, and another yet is that of a famous poet. There are also figs which represent travel and adventure and lovers.

She says, "I saw myself sitting in... this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of these figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."

Plath's description may describe our situation as well. We're given a wide range of possibilities for life, but we have to make the choices. Often our indecision leaves us stuck just where we are and unable to move ahead.

Jesus tells the rich young man that putting God at the center is the starting point that lays out all the other priorities. Once you have your base, you can begin to build upon it.

The relevant question is not "How can I fit God into my life among everything else?" That approach won't work. If you've tried that, you know it can't succeed. The real question is not "How does God fit into my life?" but "How does my life fit into **God**?"

The man in our story had to first rid himself of his wealth because his internal identity was so thoroughly caught up with money. He's like the alcoholic for whom just cutting back on drinking can't put him in control of his life.

Jesus might say to us, "If anything else is so dominating for you, then you have to get rid of it so that you can start afresh. Other things in life may be important, but they can't be predominant. Faith can have only one center. Don't you see that you can't serve two masters?"

Moses addressed the people of Israel as they prepared to enter into a covenant with God. They had been led through all their wilderness travels to a certain place and time. Here the Lord then invited them into a new depth of relationship; yet, the choice was still theirs. The gift was clear, but it was up to them whether to choose life over death, prosperity over adversity, meaning over nothingness.

The rich man was confronted with the same kind of decision. "Whatever you sacrifice," Jesus assures the man, "it will be returned ten-fold, a hundred-fold. Whatever risks you take now in my name will lead you to possibilities not even dreamed of today. I'll show you life as it is intended to be lived, beginning now and extending into the future. Come, follow me."

A pathway is laid out for each of us and what we need to do, in time, reveals itself. Jesus can point the way. God can promise the reward. But each of us has to make a personal decision about what we shall do.

So...choose life!

Each and every day, decide to choose life!