

## "When Push Comes to Shove"

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-27

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 15, 2018 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter -- Rev. Ronald Botts

A psychologist asked a person she was counseling if he had trouble making decisions, to which the man replied, "Well, yes and no."

There's some truth in this because it identifies a problem that most of us share—and that's difficulty with decisions. Every day we have to deal with hundreds of choices which must be made. Now, in perspective, most of our decisions are rather small like which section of the newspaper to read first or which pair of socks to wear. Of course there are other questions which have greater consequence, and it is generally these that we think of as the burden of decision making.

The President of the United States has many important duties. The essential job of the Office, however, is to make big decisions on behalf of the country. That is why being President is so hard, why the responsibility is so demanding and pressure-filled.

Critical decisions affecting millions of people are constantly being made, or anticipated, by the person in our highest position. It's a great responsibility and takes an extraordinary person. Country always has to take precedence over self in the most demanding moments.

One day in October of 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, John Kennedy and his aide, Ted Sorenson, were alone in the Oval Office. It was a time of great tension for the whole world, and perhaps nowhere was it felt more intensely than in that room.

Sorenson reports that at one point Kennedy rose from his favorite rocking chair after a prolonged silence. He went across to the French doors that opened onto the grounds of the West Wing. There, beyond the terrace, he stared out at the Rose Garden and beyond that to a towering Magnolia planted by Andrew Jackson.

Kennedy stood for a long time, silent, gazing outward, hands behind his back, the burden of decision almost visible on his shoulders. "Well," he said at last, "I guess this is the week I earn my salary."

Sometimes situations are thrust upon us and we are then forced to make a decision. Even failure to act is a response of sort, for as theologian Jurgen Moltmann observes: "Not to decide **is** to decide." Decisions made by default are still choices.

In our reading from Mark today, Jesus puts a choice before one who came to him looking for the key to a full life. His challenge to this man came down to "your money or eternal life," not as a threat but as an opportunity. We're told the man made his choice quickly—he opted for the money. It also seems that the rich man understood the consequences of his decision for "he went away grieving, because he had many possessions."

And that's reality, for in every major decision we make there is usually a sense of satisfaction or regret. Deep decisions call forth deep emotions. How we decide impacts how we feel.

For people of faith most significant decisions are made in light of three responsibilities: to ourselves; to others; and to God. Unfortunately, there is no simple formula as to how to weigh these considerations. Each situation or problem is inherently different. The more care and deliberation, however, the more likely the best decision will be made.

We may seek out counsel, as the man in our text did by coming to Jesus, but the final choice is a personal one. Even when good and bad options seem to be rather clear, it is still up to us to choose the better course. As a noted black preacher used to put it: "God always votes yes, the devil always votes no, and **your** vote decides the election."

The dilemma of one man faced with a momentous decision is the basis of the best-selling novel *The Caine Mutiny*. That central figure is Lt. Maryk, the executive officer of the minesweeper *Caine*. Maryk is a solid, hard-working man who just wants to do his job well. He likes the Navy and feels right there.

Ordinarily he might have gone on to a rather predictable military career, except for the fact that the *Caine* is commanded by an unstable personality named Queeg. At first Maryk stubbornly resists the warnings about the Captain voiced by other officers, but slowly his commander's imbalance becomes evident.

The choice confronting Maryk comes when the *Caine* gets caught in a typhoon. Terrified, Queeg turns the ship south. Maryk pleads with him to keep heading into the wind as their only real chance, but to no avail. The Captain, now muttering with fear, refuses to alter the ship's direction and so it is on the verge of foundering.

Maryk agonizes over what he should do. If he does nothing, he is certain they will all be lost. If he takes over command, even temporarily, he realizes his career may well be in jeopardy. Maryk struggles, then makes his decision: he relieves Queeg of command and immediately turns the ship into the wind. The craft still yaws and plunges, but it stays afloat.

Eventually, there is a court martial for Lt. Maryk but it's evident that, regardless of the consequences, he is convinced that he did what was needed. Indeed, if he hadn't decided the way he did, he and the crew would likely not have survived the typhoon. At the moment of decision he knew he would have to pull on all his courage. Yes, he could live with his decision—whatever the trial's outcome.

Now the rich man in our scripture was called upon to give up his wealth, the chief impediment to achieving his goal of eternal life, and to follow the pathway laid out by Jesus. The answer to his question was made clear, but he was left to choose whether he would do it or not. Christ offered assistance, but did not force the outcome. He provided guidance, but did not dictate its resolution. Jesus knew that the decision could only be made by the man himself.

We're led to the conclusion that this fellow is not a bad person; to the contrary, he did a lot of what he should be doing. When asked, he replied that he kept the commandments of the Law. Then "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you

own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Understand here, the problem is not the money itself but the obstacle it presents. The man has to clear certain things out of the way before he can do anything else. To participate in the Kingdom, he must cast aside his reliance on possessions and learn to put his ultimate trust in God. As long as he is surrounded by his false securities they are a constant barrier between him and his goal.

In so many words Jesus says, "Sell your goods, then give away the money that you get, and now you'll be ready to follow me. And welcome you are. I'll replace what you've lost and do it a hundredfold. I'll be with you when you need my support. You won't even miss what you thought were your treasures"

Alas, it is too much to give up. The man walks away. Jesus shakes his head with the sad observation: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God." But he could equally have said, "How hard it will be for those who love power to enter the Kingdom." or "How hard it will be for those who love notoriety." First place in one's life could be almost anything.

I was following a shiny BMW the other day with a bumper sticker which read, "The one with the most toys at the end wins." And I had to think to myself that he better have a big coffin when he dies to be able to get that car in there with him. And the plasma TV and the hot tub and everything else.

When something else becomes predominant in our lives, God becomes secondary as a consequence; and decisions will always get made on the basis of our first priority. That's just how it is.

We miss the point here if we think this story has no personal application because we're not rich. What we really need to do is identify what may be stopping us from full life. Consider this: is there something that impedes or restricts you from following Jesus—and doing it completely?

When push comes to shove, we can ultimately be true to only one master. We can only experience life fully if we are willing to subordinate false gods. We can only reach our desired destination if we are able to resist traveling down tempting detours.

Jesus looked into the eyes of the rich man and laid out for him the obvious answer of what to do. We also need to stop and examine our priorities, even if we don't want to hear the answer. Self-awareness is always the beginning point of change. The way is often provided, but then it's up to us to act.

Jesus is always there in our lives reaching out to help us. We can turn and walk away or, just as readily, take his outstretched hand and be drawn forward.

Frankly, in the balance of life, this is one decision that's really a no-brainer!