

"MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

There was a story that appeared in the New Yorker magazine several months ago that I read with some amusement. It was about a 61 year old Massachusetts grandmother who took some wrong turns and made some poor choices on the roads taken with her school bus on the first day of her new job as the school bus driver. She got so lost that she wound up in the State of Connecticut. And because she had already picked up ten kids on her route, an "all points bulletin" was issued for her on charges of kidnapping, and since she had crossed the state line, the FBI was called in.

Well, after finally locating the grandmother and her school bus and questioning her, the police and the FBI agents concluded that she had made some wrong turns and simply lost her way. They let her go.

DEVELOPMENT

Today's sermon has to do with choices and with what's involved in making the right choices. And the story recorded in the 30th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy put me on to this subject. Bible students will recall that this is a part of the great Farewell Address of Moses to his people in which he is recounting those mighty acts done by God. He reminds the people of Israel that it was God after all who freed them from captivity in Egypt and that it was God who led them out and who has journeyed with them for a long time through the wilderness of Sinai.

In response the people are told that they now stand before God in order to enter into the Covenant. Obedience to this Covenant of God would mean crossing the River Jordan and going in to the Promised Land. Disobedience, however, would mean that they would be rooted out of their Land. And Moses here is placing the choice squarely before them. He offers them life or death.

GUIDANCE IN MAKING CHOICES

Moses must have known that people like to have some guidance when it comes to making important decisions, so he was willing to offer some suggestions in the wilderness of a cross roads. And thank God he was for we can benefit from his counsel. Some of our choices are not always black and white, between right and wrong, but in the "grey" area because that's the best that can be done at that moment.

Charlie Brown was once asked by Peppermint Patty if he knew any good rules for living and he gave her his own personal set. Here they are:

"Keep the ball low. Don't leave your crayons in the sun.
Use dental floss every day. Don't spill the shoe polish.
Keep your head down when you swing. Don't let ants get
in the sugar. Always get your first serve in."

Not a bad list, but it's not as adequate for the long haul as the list that Moses offered his folks in his Farewell Address. Here he is giving us the five verbs of life. He speaks of:

"Loving the Lord. Walking in His ways. Keeping His
commandments. Obeying His voice. Cleaving to God"

These five verbs turn out to be the road signs to the Promised Land and they will assist us in the process of making the right choices.

MORE CHOICES THAN WE REALIZE

And so this morning I'd like to offer you some ideas to consider when making choices. And first-off, I'd suggest that there are usually more choices than we sometimes realize. Not only are there many more choices, but sooner or later we have to come to grips with the reality that at some point we have to choose and be accountable for our choices. Across the years in the counseling room I've known people who will try to go through life without making choices and this is often the source of trouble. It can be dangerous.

A professor I had in seminary used to tell his students "that every good road will lead to 'nowhere' when you don't know where you're going". Good advice not only for seminarians, but for everyone who participates in the human race. Moses here is trying to tell us that it is only by choosing the proper pathway, that path of "life and good over death and evil" that we can ever find our way into the Promised Land. Which raises the question: what or where is your "promised land"? Just where is it that you want to go? Where do you want to reside? Where do you want to be ten years from now, five years?

Yes, there are many "promised lands" out there and open to us, more choices than we realize but when you come down to it, only one belongs to God. I've heard people say, "Well...the Devil made me do it". It may make for interesting comedy, but in my book that's "poor theology". The Devil doesn't make us do anything. I would like to believe that the Devil is powerless against a "faithful person". And you and I are talked or "enticed" in to only what we want to be talked or "enticed" in to.

Turn the coin over. The "Slip side" of the coin would be that God does not make us do anything either. God invites. God encourages, but God does not force us to act in any particular way. We have the freedom to choose. If God made us do "good works" or made us choose the proper path, what credit would that be to us?

It is always a matter of choice, just as it was a matter of choice for those persons sitting there on the banks of the River Jordan that day long ago when Moses delivered his Farewell Address..... anticipating the great and glorious life awaiting them in their Promised Land. But - the choice would have to be theirs.

A young and eager graduate student said to his professor,

"But sir, there are two sides to every question. Right?"
"Yep" said the old professor, "And there are two sides to fly paper, but it makes a difference to the fly which side it chooses..."

And it does to us, too. So Moses was telling them how to get to the Promised Land. It's a matter of choice and to guide us along the way he is offering the five verbs of life and if we try to follow those five verbs of loving the Lord, walking in His way, keeping the Commandments, obeying His voice, cleaving or being faithful to God - we will be able to feel good about the choices we make.

DECISIONS OF MAGNITUDE ARE DIFFICULT TO MAKE

Second, I think that any decision of significant magnitude will always be difficult to make. Choices involving substance are seldom easy to make. Thought, prayer, reflection are called for.

In the award-winning novel, "Gandhi", a Hindu leader comes to the bedside of Mr. Gandhi, who is now near death, pleading with him to end his long fast. Gandhi, however, reaffirms that he will end his fast only when the Hindus and the Muslims stop fighting and make peace with each other.

The Hindu, with hatred for the Muslims burning in his eyes, says he will continue fighting. To justify his resolve, he tells how Muslims took his little boy and crushed his head. He, in turn, captured a Muslim boy and killed him the same way. And then he adds sorrowfully, "I have been living in Hell".

Gandhi reflects on this a moment and then softly says to his friend,

"I think I know a way out of Hell". And with the Hindu hanging on his words, Gandhi tells him, "Go and find a boy similar to the son the Muslims killed, take him into your home as your son and raise him as a Muslim".

Gandhi places before this anguished Hindu father the kind of choice that Moses placed before his people about to enter the Promised Land. A way out of hell is to choose life over death. One's choice brings God's blessing or it can bring the curse of God.

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse:
THEREFORE, choose life, that you and your descendants
might live".

We decide. We choose. And as we decide and choose, our lives are being formed in the process. Yes, choices of substance are seldom easy to make. We may make wrong decisions, but even that is okay for we have the choice of admitting a wrong decision and the assurance of God's freedom and God's forgiveness that enables us to pull things together and go on and make another choice.

A question that every person has to answer for himself or herself is this:

"Wilt thou be a hero or a coward? Which will it be?"

And obviously the possibility of either one - hero or coward - resides within the life of each of us. The coward stresses the difficulties and wants to play it safe by waiting until he can see his way clear beyond all shadow of doubt. However, the hero sees the difficulties and is willing to grasp the lantern of faith which lights the way for the next step and steps courageously forward. I believe that that kind of choice will always be guided and undergirded by God.

THOSE DECISIONS THAT ENCOMPASS THE FIVE VERBS OF LIFE GET US THERE

Finally,
the third
idea for your consideration. I believe that only those decisions which encompass these five verbs of life will get us to that Promised Land that is worthy of reaching.

Our choices are vital because God has given us the opportunity to find answers in those choices you and I make. If I may quote Gandhi again,

"In the midst of death, life persists. In the midst of untruth, truth persists. In the midst of darkness, light persists."

We're often called upon to make those choices that bring about life and truth and light. We may not always understand why things happen to us, but no matter what happens, we do at least have a choice as to how we respond and so often it is that response that determines what our existence is going to be like over there in the "promised land" we hope one day to reach.

I've had in my sermon notebook for some time the story of two paraplegics. One was Kenneth Wright, a High School football star - a boxer, hunter, and a pretty good college wrestler. A broken neck sustained in a wrestling match in 1979 left him paralyzed from the chest down. He underwent therapy and his doctors were hopeful that one day he might be able to walk without braces and crutches, but apparently this former athlete could not reconcile himself to his physical disability. He talked two of his buddies in to taking him in his wheelchair in to a wooded area where they left him alone with a 12 gauge shot-gun. After they left, he held the shot-gun to his abdomen and pulled the trigger. Kenneth Wright. Age 24. Suicide....said the paper the next day.

The second paraplegic in the news article was Jim McGowan. Thirty-five years of age now, but at the age of 19 he was stabbed and left paralyzed from the chest down. For many years he has been confined to a wheelchair. He's been in the news the past year because he made a successful parachute jump, landing on his target in the middle of Lake Wallenpaupack over in the Poconos. The news media learned a number of interesting things about Jim McGowan such as he lives alone, cooks his own meals, washes his clothes, keeps and cleans his own home. He even drives himself in his specially equipped car. He has written three books and did the photography for the country's first book on the history of wheelchair sports. Three years ago, he tried to swim the English Channel. Two paraplegics. One chose life and the other did not.

A good many of the choices that you and I are called on to make do come down to "either - or" propositions. There really isn't all that much "middle ground". So many of those Biblical decisions that we read about were "either - or" propositions. It is simply not possible to come down on the side of both life and death, of both good and evil.

Some of us try it, but those who do tend to remind me of those equestrian riders in the circus - you know the ones I speak of - the ones with one foot on one horse and the other foot on another horse...running side by side. Even if they manage some semblance of balance, straddling the two horses, they end up only going around in circles. Which reminds me of the person, the athlete who told his coach he lives on a balanced diet...."A big MAC in one hand...and a big MAC in the other hand".

Those Biblical choices are never easy. Like Jesus telling the rich man to "Go and sell what you have...give it to the poor...then come, follow Me". Or like Mr. Gandhi telling a Hindu wrestling with his soul in Hell, "Go find a son and then raise him as a Muslem". Not many can do it and not many do it, but the few who do know the lasting rewards of life and blessing. They come in to the "promised land" assured that their voice is one which will be pleasing to God and with that comes that deep inner peace.

Remember how Abraham Lincoln was once asked by a member of a church who was making a plea for a certain cause and closed his remarks with one pious hope that "The Lord is on our side". To which Lincoln responded,

"I am not at all concerned about that for we know that the Lord is always on the side of right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should choose to be on the Lord's side!"

CLOSING Christian discipleship begins with a conscious choice. It's ours to make. And it's far more important to be on the "Lord's side" than it is to try to get the Lord to be on our side. When we take these five verbs from the Farewell Address of Moses and run with them, then you and I stand a pretty good chance making it over to our Promised Land. Say them with me now in the quietness of your heart:

LOVE the Lord.
WALK in His ways.
KEEP His commandments.
OBEY His voice.
CLEAVE to Him.

PRAYER Wrestle with each of us, Lord, in those dark and dusty corners of our lives...where indecision often settles in. Help us to be strong and of good courage that we may make the right choices that will take us to our promised land. To always trust and obey as we walk in His way. For us there is no other way to the abundant life, to that blessed life that Jesus has given us. In His name we pray. Amen.

L W K O C

"To every man there openeth
A Way, and Ways and A Way.
The high soul climbs the HIGH WAY,
And the low soul gropes the
LOW.

And in between on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.

But to every man there openeth
A High Way and a Low.

And every soul decideth the way
his soul shall go."

Reminds me of the athlete who
says he lives on a balanced
diet -

"A Big Mac in one hand and a
Big Mac" in the other."