

“Choices”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

What choices did you have to make this past week? Did you choose to have dessert after your dinner out with a friend, or were you “good” and refrained from the extra calories? Did you choose to watch television in the evening, or did you pick up a book to read that night? Did you choose to let your child attend a sleepover, or did their behavior during the week make that a moot point? Did you choose to buy that new piece of furniture for your home, or did you decide to hold onto that money for the time being?

Sometimes the choices we make are minor, like what brand of toothpaste we will use, or what we will have for lunch at a restaurant. However, sometimes the choices we make are major, and have a far-reaching impact. Will we keep or pull our children from their current school district? Will we stay in our current job, or seek a new job opportunity elsewhere? Will we choose to invest our resources in a particular way, and how will that impact our overall future financial health? Will we choose to proceed with a medical procedure, or will we hold off and deal with the long-term consequences?

Sometimes we make a choice and we don’t realize until later that we actually made that choice. Last week in the winter seminar series, we looked back at the early influences on the Scottish Reformer John Knox, our church’s namesake. And early in his career, he was exposed to the theologies of Martin Luther and John Calvin, and their respective views on worship, communion, and church government. Knox was drawn more to the Reformed views of Calvin, and it was a choice not made at once, but over a period of time. And yet, consider the implications of that choice. Knox took the views of Calvin and brought them back to Scotland, laying the foundations for the Church of Scotland, and eventually, the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Had he chosen to be aligned with the Lutheran theology of the Reformation, our Presbyterian Church today might have bishops, we might kneel before an altar for communion, and you might have to listen to me sing as a cantor each Sunday!

The thing about choices is that they always have consequences. The choice John Knox made in his faith journey had far-reaching consequences on our modern-day church today. When we choose to take shortcuts in school or work, the consequence is we aren’t living up to our fullest potential as God’s children. When we choose to engage in self-gratifying behavior, the consequence is that we can become selfish

and lose connection with those who love us. When we choose to stay at home on a Sunday or only engage in faith on our own terms, the consequence is that our relationship with God and our sisters and brothers in Christ is weakened and can become broken.

Our passage today from the book of Deuteronomy describes how the people of Israel were faced with a choice: remain faithful to God, or turn away from God and follow others gods. The consequence of that choice was simple: life or death. And while not every choice we face as modern Christians is about life or death, how we make decisions – individually and as the church – ultimately reflects how we intentionally and humbly seek to obey the commandments of the Lord our God.

One Presbyterian pastor writes: *This passage from Deuteronomy is a portion of Moses' farewell address. Moses has led the Hebrew people through the wilderness for forty years. He has put up with their grumbling, raged at their idolatry, pleaded with God on their behalf and brought them to the point of transition. Now his death is imminent. The Promised Land lies before them, but they must face their past failings before they can look to their future. Will the people even have a future without Moses? In God's covenant relationship with the Hebrews, it's not God's faithfulness that's in question, but the Hebrews' obedience. Will they keep their end of the deal? After all, they are prone to wander*

(Fairfax Fair, The Christian Century, February 5, 2014: 19).

The words of Moses here are not just empty phrases uttered by a gifted speaker. They are filled with the emotion, the pain, the joy, and the memories of all they have been through these forty-plus years. They are heartfelt and deepened by the knowledge that God has been with them – in freedom from slavery in Egypt, in living in the wilderness these many years, and now, on the precipice of entering the promised land. These words are not just words on a page. They are pleas that emanate from the core of Moses' soul, and the depths of God's love for his people.

"I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity . . . If you obey the commandments I am commanding you, then you shall live and become numerous . . . If your heart turns away and you do not hear, then you shall perish . . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (30:15-20, selected verses).

The Israelites are called to "obey the commandments of the Lord your God." Throughout this passage, those commandments remind us of key instructions which the people have been given by God through Moses. There are the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20, which primarily speak of how God's people are to keep a right relationship with both God and one another within the bounds of covenantal life. There also is the Shema, the command from Deuteronomy 6, which calls on God's people to love the Lord their with all their heart, all their might, and all their soul. Choosing to obey God's commandments reflects the

knowledge of how to honor God's covenantal relationship with his people.

But, as Carol Dempsey notes, "obeying" is more than blind acceptance or "doing as one is told." *Obedience means "to listen," which involves more than just hearing and following. Obedience is a discernment process that involves not only the mind and will but also, and most especially, the heart. In other places in Deuteronomy (11:13; 13:4; 30:2), Moses calls on the Israelites to listen "with all their heart." In the biblical tradition, the heart is the most important organ, one that is central to God's relationship with Israel. God's love for Israel is an affair of the heart, and God, in turn, wants such a relationship to be reciprocal. Covenant is supposed to be grounded in mutual, wedded love. Obedience, then, calls the Israelites "to listen" to God's word in their inner selves, at their core, and to live out that word, which, in turn, will result in life transformed truly into God's image, according to God's likeness, with God's ways made manifest through the people's daily life together* (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010:340-342).

When the choices we make result in damaging or harmful consequences, have we lost the capacity to listen to God's Word in our life of obedience? When our choices as individuals are driven primarily by what we want, rather than what we need, have our hearts turned away from God, instead being led to bow down and serve other gods? When our choices as a church are shaped by fear, uncertainty, and holding on, rather than being shaped by hope, excitement, and anticipation, have our hearts lost their love of God and one another, not evident in our daily life together?

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life."

One of the things that happened for me during my sabbatical last year was it gave me the opportunity to look closely at the choices I was making in life. I realized pretty quickly that I had lost the capacity to listen clearly and intentionally to God in my heart, and my choices were reflective of that failure to obey. My eating habits and how I prioritized my time were two key areas that I recognized were woefully out of sync with God's command to love the Lord with my entire being. I was choosing death, not life.

That time of renewal provided me the opportunity to hear God through these words of Moses, and make new choices in my life. That's why, since August 4 of last year, I have bought one soda out of that Coke machine down the hall, rather than the 3-4 I was buying each day. I've lost about 25 pounds over the last seven months, but still have much more to lose. Previously, I had become a slave to email, and that is why I only check it on days that I am in the office, and no longer have it tied to my iPhone. I am not afraid to say, "I can't schedule a meeting

that day,” because my time for my family as a father and husband is just as important as my time as a pastor.

Does that make me free of faults? Heavens no! I continue to struggle with many choices in life, and the consequences of those choices. But I can honestly say that I am more grounded in God’s covenantal love for me than I was a couple of years ago. I can honestly say that I am able to listen to God’s commandments with a deeper reciprocal love for God than I was a couple of years ago. And I can more deeply affirm and profess, each and every day of my life, that affirmation of faith which Paul states to the Romans: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

How are your choices reflective of your faith in the one triune God? How are your choices rooted in the covenantal love of the God of Abraham, Moses, and Israel? How do your choices – big and small – offer others a witness to your belief that nothing will ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

Standing on the precipice of hope and promise, how will we respond – as individuals and as the church – to the Lord’s choice: life and prosperity, or death and adversity? May our choice be rooted in faith, hope, and trust in the one who only wishes for us life as our creator, redeemer and sustainer.

Thanks be to God. Amen.