

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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When I came to United States for the first time in 2016, my advisor invited me for lunch and we went to a restaurant. I saw the menu card and I absolutely had no idea what I wanted to eat. There were so many choices, but still I was not able to choose because I was not aware of any of those. However, if I go to an Indian restaurant, even though I haven't tasted all the dishes in that particular restaurant, I am quite confident in what I want to eat. In our present scenario, there are overwhelming choices in each and everything which sometimes makes it hard to decide what we want. And sometimes, whether or not we know what we are agreeing to, we are forced to agree. For example, we are required to agree to the several pages of user agreement when we buy a phone or phone connection or internet connection or whatnot. No one has time to read all those pages, but we still choose to agree. We live in a situation of multiple choices where we are free to choose whatever is best for us. When we know, what is ahead of us, it makes our decision-making less complicated.

Today, as we heard the passages for meditation this morning, we read about some people who had a choice of what they wanted to do. Three men pass along a man who had been beaten and required help, but each one chooses different things. God created us in God's own image and likeness but not as robots pulling our strings and making us dance accordingly. We have a choice in front of us towards fullness of life for all, whether we would choose to do justice or not care about it. Yet, God expects us to do justice and look at all people as God's image. Let us reflect on three choices that God expects us to make so that everyone lives life to the fullest:

Choose to obey God

Choose to transgress the boundary

Choose to be healed

Choose to Obey God

The Old Testament reading for today is from Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy follows the Hittite treaty structure. In the Hittite treaties, a dominant or powerful Empire would enter into a treatise with a vassal nation. Thus, the Suzerain would proclaim his love and ask nothing but love and loyalty in return, but still the vassal nation is inferior. In Deuteronomic theology, God makes a covenant with the people of Israel, promising blessings and prosperity, but only love and loyalty toward Yahweh in return.

After 40 years of wilderness journey have passed, Moses is preparing the Israelites to cross Jordan mentioning the promise which God gives to Israel:

For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut. 30:9b-10, NRSV).

Turning to obey God is not hard and not too far. Following God's commandments might seem hard. But the Deuteronomist says that it is neither in heaven, and nor beyond the sea. It is just near to us, in our mouth and in our hearts. When the word of God is in our mouths and hearts, we choose to obey God's word and commandments, which is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind. We all love God and we claim to do so. Our love towards God is complete only when we love our neighbors

as ourselves. We are called to obey God by loving our neighbors as our own selves. We need to make a deliberate choice to love each other even if we are different or even if we do not agree with each other. Let us choose to obey God and God's commandment of love.

Choose to transgress the boundary

The word “transgress” is often used as a negative word. Even in many psalms and especially in the Psalm 25 we sang today in v. 7: *Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.* This word makes more sense to me in my own language Tamil: *Meeruthal*: doing something which a person is not required to do. In the traffic signal, we do have traffic rules that the red light requires us to stop. If a person does not stop in red, it is a transgression as that person did not abide by the rules. Yet, if there is an ambulance or fire truck, if we need to give way, we have to transgress which is right to that particular situation. In our society, we do have norms which were believed to be right by certain people. In the world which God created and intended to be a place of love and affection, hatred and exclusion is increasing day by day. We have created our own boundaries in every aspect which has resulted in divisions and discriminations among people. There are times where we need to transgress the boundaries for the sake of love and life. The gospel reading about the conversation between a lawyer and Jesus unveils an ethics of love. In the gospel according to Luke, chapter 10, Jesus is interrogated by a lawyer with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus uses his communicative strategy by turning the question back to him and gets a response back from him. Furthermore, the lawyer comes up with his second question: Who is my neighbor? Now, Jesus uses another strategy of using parables and narrates the parable of the wounded man and the three passers-by which is popularly called as “parable of the good Samaritan.” This parable would make more sense to the ears of Jesus’ listeners than us as they knew the context of Jesus’ story better than us. Jesus

talks about a priest, levite and a Samaritan. Priest and Levite, possibly, are Jews and the third one is a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans were always in conflict and do not go well with each other. The reason goes back to the Old Testament times. We all know that after Solomon's period, the kingdom was divided into Northern, Israel with 10 tribes and Southern, Judah with 2 tribes. The Samaritans were descended from people of the old Northern Kingdom (Israel) together with foreigners brought into that area by Assyria following the conquest and the end of that kingdom in 722 BCE. They had their own version of the Pentateuch, observed different customs, had their own temple at Mt. Gerizim (John 4:9), and were typically 'considered as inferior.'

Jesus shows a contrast between two attitudes: compassion and kindness contrasted with individual piety; transgressing the norm vs. following the norm. The regulations on defilement from contact with a dead or near to death body would also be found in the Samaritan Pentateuch, but those did not stop the Samaritan of this story from showing compassion and kindness. He was able to transcend the boundary in love. The lawyer's question, "who is my neighbor," in response to the mandate that a person must love a neighbor as oneself, is being answered here in a different sense. The neighbor is often understood as an object or receiver of benevolence. However, the word neighbor is now used as a subject, to denote the person who shows benevolence or neighborliness to others. A "neighbor" could be any person who is in need and also the one who can show compassion and kindness, even if it is the case that one has to cross the boundaries of his/her ethnic or religious ideologies. The point is no longer whether the wounded and beaten up victim lying on the road could be considered legally a "neighbor" to either the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but rather which one of them acted as a neighbor to this victim. Not only love, neighborliness is also a verb. It is not that being a mere neighbor does create love, but love creates neighborliness. Yes, LOVE creates neighborliness.

Choose to be Healed

Whenever we hear this parable, one of the implications is that we put ourselves in the position of the Samaritan who helped the wounded victim that we should show love to the neighbor in need. We are called to think from the perspective of the wounded victim too. We do not have much details about this victim, other than that he was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. In his near-death situation, his choice was to be saved but not about who saves him. The victim was saved and healed by a person whom he also would have despised until a few minutes ago. There are times where we despise some people in terms of our own prejudices and stigma, but it is time that we need to choose to be healed by God and by the ones whom we excluded.

By narrating this parable, Jesus challenges, not only the lawyer but also his listeners, to step out from an attitude that is dominated by our own cultural and legal norms to a fullness of life that is lived beyond the norms whether those be racial, sexual, ethnic, religious, or economic that consider the neighbors as “others.” In a history of showing hatred towards one another, putting certain people as inferior, everyone needs healing: victims, perpetrators, oppressors, oppressed, silent spectators and the voiceless. We would have been in one or many of these categories at various situations and life experiences. We are called to be healed by God’s healing touch. We are called to Christ’s gracious table where we partake in Christ’s body and blood as one family of God loving each other. We are healed by God’s love; we are healed by the love of one another.

Let us gather around God’s table which has room for all choosing life for ourselves and for one another: let us choose to obey God, choose to transgress and choose to be healed. Amen.