

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's readings both present a choice. In the Gospel reading, Jesus addressed the twelve disciples after many of his disciples had left him. Jesus asked, "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus presented a choice—to go or to stay. In the first reading, Joshua presented the choice regarding whom the tribes of Israel will serve—the Lord or something else. Choices.

As the summer comes to an end, we too are presented with many choices. What will we do for school in the fall? What will work look like? Will you accept a new job? Will you go into work or work remotely? How will you respond to the pandemic? Will you move to a new home, have another child, get married, buy a house, move apartments, or start a new career? Choices abound.

Personally, I'm feeling exhausted by all the choices. A couple weeks ago, Alex and I closed on a small summer cabin. We knew it was a fixer upper. We knew it needed the floors stabilized, work on the siding, a new roof, and the list goes on. All of the choices regarding the next steps are exhausting. Can we do that repair ourselves or do we need help? What company do you go with? Do we need to save up and wait on that for later? What do we do about the new hole we discovered? The list goes on. Choice after choice after choice—it's exhausting.

I imagine that the Israelites were feeling decision fatigue as well. After all, they had just traveled through the desert for forty years. They had decided (a) where they

were going to live on the land that God had provided and (b) how to get along with one another. Then, Joshua asked them to make another choice—a choice to serve the Lord or something else.

For those of us who have been Christian for all our lives, it's hard to imagine being presented with this choice. Sometimes it doesn't even feel like being a Christian is a choice. However, each day we're presented with the choice to align our thoughts, actions, and lives with God's vision or to serve something else. It becomes so easy to serve climbing the corporate ladder, or to serve the American dream, or to serve seeking happiness, or to serve money, fame, knowledge, success, acknowledgment, our dreams, or someone else. It's a daily choice to serve either God's vision of love, justice, peace, grace, and understanding or to serve the world's vision.

Back in the reading from Joshua, the Israelites' story is not over. After Joshua asked them to choose the Lord or something else, Joshua says, "You cannot serve the Lord." Wait, what? Didn't we just get a choice? Well, the Hebrew Bible scholar Ralph Jacobson reminds us to look at the entire history of the Israelites. That is, how did they do when they worked to choose to serve the Lord? As we read through the Hebrew Bible we read about if how they choose the Lord under the leadership of the judges. Turns out, they can't. Could they choose the Lord when they were led by the United Monarchy? Nope. Could they choose the Lord in the Northern Kingdom? Nope. Could they choose the Lord in the Southern Kingdom? Nope. The Hebrew Scriptures show repeatedly that the Israelites cannot choose God.

Well, since God chose the Israelites, then what is God going to do since the Israelites cannot choose God? Well, we find out that God sticks with them. Eventually, God came in human flesh to remind us that “you did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Those are the exact words Jesus says a little later in John’s gospel: “*You* did not choose me, but *I* chose you.”

For us as Lutherans, that’s refreshing. After all, what we know to be true is that God always comes to us. We cannot climb our way to God. We cannot fully choose to align our thoughts with God’s thoughts, or our actions with God’s actions. It’s just not possible! God has chosen us. God has saved us. We are set free from the thoughts that enslave us to the world’s vision. Then, each day we can make small steps to align ourselves with God’s vision. That is, in those daily choices we make—whether in school, work, homelife, or on vacation—we can choose to align our actions with God’s vision to serve with loving generosity.

One such place that has embodied this work is Café Esperanza in Reading, PA. Café Esperanza is affiliated with Hope Lutheran Church and is supported by ELCA World Hunger grants because it is an example of loving generosity. Café Esperanza is a community café that operates as a pay-what-you-can restaurant. So, instead of operating as a soup kitchen where every person gets whatever is made for the masses, at Café Esperanza, you get a choice. Want a sandwich toasted? You’ve got it! Do you want soup? No. To-go or dine in? It’s your choice. Then, you pay what you can afford—no questions asked. Emily Wolfe, the hospitality manager, said that “choice means dignity.”

While we might not be able to choose God, because God already chose us, we can still be beacons of love by dignifying another. We can work to overcome our own biases and acknowledge that God has not made a one-size fits all. We can come to appreciate God's gift of diversity with varied races, languages, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities, and so much more. Together, as God's people, we might follow God's example and choose to be in relationship with those who think differently than us, to choose to respect those who speak differently than us, and to choose to dignify those who look and act differently than us.

Friends, there it is. Today's readings give us a choice but it doesn't give us a choice. We are reminded that God has already chosen us and that is a done deal. Thank God for one less choice! At the same time, in response to God's love, acceptance, and grace, we do have a choice to better align our actions with God's vision. To serve in love, bring dignity to the marginalized, and to word towards God's justice. In this, we will come to know our loving God more fully and begin to grasp what it means to have eternal life. Amen.