

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Life Lessons from Luke: Choosing
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Jeremiah 23:23-32; Luke 12:49-56

He never seemed to get any mail, when all the rest of us seemed to get something. One of the best parts of my week as a Peace Corps Volunteer was heading to the office in Manila to pick up my mail. On a regular basis there would be a letter from Cindy or my mother. It was a pick-me-up after a long week. But there was one of our Manila area volunteers with whom we socialized that never got any mail. Finally at a gathering at the house where we lived, I asked him about it. What unfolded was an interesting story about family dynamics. He came from a well-to-do family that owned a very successful and profitable business. The expectations were that when he finished college, he would join the family company and carry on his place in the line of succession. Somewhere along the way, however, he decided that he wanted to make a difference in the world not associated with the family business. This desire is what led him to apply for the Peace Corps. When his parents found out, they made it clear that if he joined the Peace Corps, which they considered a waste of time, they would cut him off from the family. And so, my friend had a choice to make: give up on the Peace Corps and stay connected with his family, or join the Peace Corps and be cut off. He chose the latter, and his family pretended as if never existed.

Choices. We make them every day. In fact, we probably make dozens of individual choices, almost all of which are inconsequential. We choose when to get up and when to go to bed. We choose what to wear, which shirt or blouse, which pair of pants or skirt. We choose what we will have for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We choose how fast to drive and whether to run that yellow light that always seems to come our way. We choose to exercise or not. We choose what to read or watch on one of our seemingly endless streaming services. Few, if any, of these choices are of any lasting consequence. They are simply part of our daily routines. But sometimes in our lives there come moments when we make choices that will have lasting consequences. These can be as varied as the friends we keep, the partners we choose, or the jobs we take and leave. Yet, even beyond these choices, there are those moments when we must choose whether to do what we know God would have us do, or what our friends, family, or society think we ought to do. These are the most difficult choices, because they can sever relationships, families, and perhaps even our careers. These are the kinds of choices that are at the center of both our passages this morning.

Jeremiah lived in a society much like every society that has ever existed. It was a society in which there were the wealthy and powerful and the poor and marginalized. In between these two groups were those who benefited from this socio-economic structure and so were happy to go along to get along. And this group included most of the professional prophets of the day who were employed by the crown. They were more than happy to tell the wealthy and powerful that all was well. The only trouble with this kind of arrangement was that, at least as Jeremiah was concerned, it violated God's Torah. God's law was designed to bring equity to God's people. But in Judah, the wealthy and powerful were crushing the poor by buying and selling them, failing to pay their wages, and pretending that there was no societal responsibility to care for widows, orphans, and strangers as the Law of Moses required. Jeremiah then had a choice to make. He could choose to speak out, driven by God's calling upon his life, or could join the other prophets in going along to get along. As we can see from our reading, Jeremiah chose the latter. He was relentless in his demands that people live up to God's commandments. In the end, all this got him slapped by another prophet in the presence of the King, twice placed in prison, having to listen to calls for his death, and being thrown into a pit while waiting to be executed.

This theme of difficult choices carries over into the passage in Luke. Jesus begins by telling his listeners that he has come to call people to make the difficult choices to align their lives with God's will. This is the statement about casting fire on earth. This fire was not an all-consuming fire, but a refining fire. It was the fire that refined metals, separating the good metal from the dross. Or in our case, separating people's poor choices from their Godly choices, so that the Godly choices were all that was left. Jesus then continues by speaking about his own choice; the choice to go to the cross. His death is the baptism with which he must be baptized. He, like Jeremiah, felt compelled by God to make the difficult

choice. The visual image in Jesus' words is that he is going down into the waters of the mikvah, or ritual baths of purification surrounding the Temple in Jerusalem. But unlike pilgrims coming to the Temple, he is not sure if he will come out of the water because he is going to his death on the cross. It is a choice to trust that God would raise him. We know this choice of the cross is a difficult one because in the garden prior to his arrest, Jesus prays that God will take this "baptism" from him. Yet, in the end, Jesus chooses the difficult way.

Jesus then follows the comments about his own choice and by telling his disciples what can happen if they make Godly choices rather than choosing to go along to get along. The result is division. Households will be divided; fathers will be divided from their sons; mothers will be divided from their daughters; mother-in-laws will be divided from their daughters-in-law. While we may not be overly moved by these images of division since they are a regular part of life in the 21st century, they were appalling to Jesus' listeners because the family was the most important, and most sacred set of relationships in the first century. Families depended on one another. Families were bound by sacred duties and obligations. The thought that there would be division was frightening and scandalous. Jesus then tells them that they must see that the time for choosing was upon them, and they must either choose the way of Jesus and Torah, or the way of going along to get along.

One would think then that once people chose the way of Jesus that there would be no more divisions. Unfortunately, that has not been so. In fact, it has been the opposite. I say this because throughout the history of the church divisions have always been with us. We can see this most clearly in the great divisions of the church. Divisions began in the early 300s when the church divided over the nature of Jesus. This continued around the year 1000 with The Great Schism, where Roman and Orthodox churches split. Next came the Reformation, where Luther and Calvin led churches out of the Roman Church. In our own nation splits occurred in the 1850s and 1860s over slavery. I would argue this morning that we are once again in a time of division. The division now is over the full inclusion of all people in the life and work of the church. What happened and is happening is that churches and members divided, or self-selected, by choosing one side or the other of the inclusion debate and then migrated to different churches or denominations that suited their beliefs. This has occurred in virtually all mainline denominations. We at First Church, intentionally chose the way of radical welcome and inclusion of all persons because we believe this is the way of Jesus. We chose to be Everybody's Church because we believe that Jesus' love is radical and all inclusive, welcoming all persons into the community. And because of this, two things happened. First, many of you chose to become part of our community because you believe that God's love in Jesus is radically inclusive. Second, some people have left us because they didn't agree with this vision. And this has made us sad because we believe that the church can be a wider community in which people can disagree and still be faithful.

It seems then that Jesus was right, that we would reach this place of division even within the church. Yet this morning I hope we will remember two things. First, that it takes all churches to make the one church of Jesus Christ. In other words, even when we are divided from other churches, we are still the one church. I often say to my friends who take their churches out of our denomination, that even though they think they are not part of us, they still are because we are all one church. And even when we disagree about dozens of things, we are still the one church of Jesus Christ. The second thing I hope we remember is that even though we divide ourselves, we still come together; we come together in mission. The image that I will always remember about this is in San Antonio when our church was engaged in a Habitat for Humanity build. In San Antonio, Habitat would build entire subdivisions. And if someone looked at the churches that were building houses, they would have seen Presbyterian houses, and Methodists houses, and Pentecostal houses, and Missouri Synod Lutheran houses, and Assemblies of God houses. In other words, churches that could disagree about almost everything, can and do come together as the body of Christ to serve those in need.

Choices. Sooner or later most of us will have to make a choice that will divide us; divide us from a job, from family, from friends, or perhaps even from our culture. These choices are not easy. They are incredibly sad. Yet this is what Christ is calling us to do. Christ is calling us to make choices that honor him and honor the God who has given us life. The challenge that I want to offer to us this morning is this, to ask ourselves, are we ready to make those choices that allow me to be faithful to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?