

Sermon for Pentecost XIX—Year B 2018
Do you also wish to go away?

As most of you know, I've been vacationing the past two weeks in Cooperstown where my husband serves as music director of the Glimmerglass Festival.

This means that I get to attend any performance of the four shows the Festival produces each summer.

This year I actually saw all four productions of the season—two of which my husband Joe conducted.

I saw the 18th century comedy, *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini, and the 20th century Czechoslovakian folktale, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, by Janacek.

I attended a performance of the 21st century composition *Silent Night* by American composer Kevin Puts—a composition that won a Pulitzer prize

and I saw *West Side Story* the acclaimed Broadway and film composed by Leonard Bernstein

(whose centennial was celebrated last Saturday).

Oddly enough,

the only comedy out of all four of the productions

was the Rossini opera—*The Barber of Seville*—

Can you believe it? No deaths! In an Italian opera, too!

But in all of the other productions, there were several deaths—

Despite its serene title, *Silent Night* is an opera about WWI.

Many people remarked over and over that this was a particularly good “season” ---which, when I think about the seriousness of most of the stories, is rather remarkable.

As I look back on the productions, I am struck that the element of making a choice or taking a stand that runs through each of the stories—and in each story, even in the comedy,

the choices the characters make are both great and small,

and . . . yet, have life and death consequences.

Only one of the stories is based on an actual historical event.

Yet, each story and the human condition they portray bear out the biblical choice that Moses presented to the Israelites so long ago . . .

"Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!" (Deut. 30:19)

Joshua echoes such a choice when he asks the tribes of Israel to "Choose this day whom you will serve . . ."

And Jesus, intensifies this choice in offering his very flesh and blood to be consumed—a difficult teaching indeed!

No wonder he asks, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Well, do you?

If we're honest, I think many of us have had more than one occasion or even a whole season when we have wanted to choose to leave, to throw our hands up and say, this Jesus stuff is too difficult—who can accept it? I don't know if I can.

What does it mean to choose God?

Even though I grew up in a Lutheran church, the congregation had a strong affinity for "revival" type theology. I remember going to church as a little girl, and hearing visiting preachers inviting us to "make a choice" for Jesus—to come forward and kneel and accept Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Growing up in that environment, my choosing Jesus was somewhat compulsory. After all, I didn't want to be the only one sitting in the pew when everyone else was kneeling at the altar!

Eventually, I came to a better understanding of the gospel—

Yes, thanks to Luther and some really good preaching of the gospel—
I came to understand that my salvation didn't depend entirely on me and my choices.
Today, I lean away from the personal, anxiety-ridden version of choosing and sink into the greater, all-encompassing story of God's grace—
a story about God's choice with and for you and me—
that is much bigger, older and wiser than
the fickle ups and downs of my emotional life.
I've learned to lean into the communal, trusting that I'm one small part of a vast, interconnected Body.

For the most part, these are good and salutary changes in my perspective.
They have deepened my faith.
I'm no longer worried or worn out by what Luther would call "scrupulosity" and guilt.
And yet . . . as the Scriptures for this week make clear, choice still matters.

Choose this day whom you will serve
Joshua tells the people of God.
Choose this day.
Here.
Now.

Do you also want to go away?
Jesus asks as some of his disciples take offense and abandon him.
Now the stakes have gone up.
Jesus has said the shocking thing.
The seemingly impossible thing.
"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them."
"Whoever eats me will live because of me."

Excuse the pun, but this is the fork in the road.
It's time to choose!
In other words, these are passages about *real* choices.
Real choices with real consequences.

But here's the interesting thing:
what's at stake in these decisions
is not the identity or eternal security of the choosers.
In the reading from Joshua,
the Israelites are already chosen and beloved of God.
They have a long history with Yahweh —
a history of deliverance from slavery,
manna in the desert,
and steady direction in the wilderness.

Likewise, the people who abandon Jesus
are not starry-eyed newbies;
John's Gospel makes clear
that they are already his "disciples."
He has fed them, taught them, healed them, and loved them.

No, what's at stake in both stories
is whether or not God's already-beloved-and-rescued children
will choose — hourly, daily, moment by moment —
to live fully into who they already are.
The daily "altar call" is a call to hold in tension
two amazing and paradoxical truths:
First, that God has already chosen us.
And second, that we are *therefore* invited to choose (or not choose)
God in return, not once or twice,
but over and over and over again.
To trade one version of choice for the other
is to diminish and distort the Gospel.
What Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace"—
that is receiving God's grace without discipleship—

without choosing to pick up your cross and follow Jesus.

And so now we're back to the question of what does it mean to choose God?

Not as a one-time walk down the aisle,
not as an emotional catharsis
in a beautiful sanctuary or worship service,
but as an intimate gift
meant for both our individual *and* our collective lives?
A costly practice?
A daily, hard-won discipline?
In other words . . . discipleship.
Choosing between life and death,
love and hatred,
to stand firm and withstand the evil day
and proclaim the gospel of peace.
Costly choices indeed!

Which is why we need to take note that neither Joshua nor Jesus take pains to make choosing God easy.
If anything, they make it harder.

Joshua explains in no uncertain terms
the fidelity, obedience, and tenacity
a covenant relationship with God requires.
“If you'd rather worship the idols of your ancestors, go for it,”
he tells his listeners.
“Because the life Yahweh calls you to is no joke.
He means business.”

Likewise, Jesus doesn't argue back
or make excuses when his followers take offense
and deem his teachings “too hard.”
He never offers them “Christ Lite”
or “Jesus for Dummies” or “Cheap Grace.”

No, he lets them wander off with their questions unanswered and their doubts unresolved.

Why?

Because he's not so much user-friendly as he is unflinchingly honest.

Yes, this teaching *is* hard.

It's also glorious, it's also life-giving, it's also blessed, but it's *hard*.

What does it mean to choose God?

According to Jesus, it means "eating" his very essence, taking the Incarnation so deeply into our own bodies and souls that we exude the flavor of Christ to the world.

It means doing what Jesus did and living as Jesus lived.

It means turning the other cheek.

It means loving our enemies.

It means walking the extra mile.

It means losing our lives in order to gain them.

It means trusting that the first will be last and the last first.

It means seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness, first.

It means denying ourselves.

It means the cross.

Honestly, it's stunning that Jesus had any followers left.

Maybe the real miracle of the bread and fish story is not that Jesus fed five thousand people with a tiny bagged lunch, but that even a handful of those people stuck around when he was finished with this teaching.

“Do you also want to go away?”

There’s something so vulnerable and poignant in the question.
I imagine Jesus asks it sadly,
but with his characteristic compassion and understanding.
He knows full well what he's asking of his followers,
and he wants them to know that his love is a freeing love.
They're free to walk away.

The question makes me uncomfortable,
because the answer is yes.
Yes, I *do* want to go away sometimes.
I want to quit.
I want to be comfortable.
I want to pick an easier, less demanding,
less costly version of the Gospel.
But here’s the deal:
that version doesn’t exist.
It just plain doesn’t!
So Peter rightly responds to Jesus,
*“Lord, to whom would we go?
You have the words of eternal life.”*

I’m comforted by the fact that even bold, brash Peter
doesn’t shout a Spirit-filled “No!” to Jesus’s question.
He doesn't say "yes" or "no."
He just responds with a question of his own.
Not an enthusiastic, flattering question.
A searching one.
“Lord, what are the alternatives?
Your teachings are hard, but they have life in them.
If you truly are who you say you are,
why would we choose death when life is right here,
in your words, in your body,
in the strange food you’re asking us to eat?
You are Life itself. To whom else would we go?”

What does it mean to choose God?
What has it meant to you in the past,
and what does it mean now?
It's a question you and I must keep asking ourselves,
because the choice never goes away.
Choose *this* day.
And *this* day.
And the day after that.

Keep choosing, because God has chosen you and me.
He always and already chooses us.
Now it's our turn.