
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Year B

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

Choices

Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen. – Act 1:24

After Jesus ascended back into heaven forty days after his resurrection the disciples found themselves with a problem. Jesus himself had chosen twelve disciples to be his core leadership team. The problem was that after the dust had settled surrounding the chaotic events connected to Jesus' death and resurrection there were only eleven disciples left standing - still alive. Judas Iscariot had killed himself after he realized the full extent of what he had done by betraying Jesus into the hands of the Jewish authorities. Jesus had chosen twelve disciples and that wasn't merely because it was the size that best afforded excellence in small group productivity. No. The Old Covenant that God had made with his people the Israelites in the Old Testament was embodied in the twelve tribes of Israel descended through the lineage of the twelve sons of Jacob. When you hear the symbolic number twelve you should think "Oh, that's talking about the people of God." Likewise, in the New Covenant, through Jesus Christ's saving work on the cross, God's people are now defined by their faith in Jesus Christ as passed on through the lineage of the twelve disciples. What characterizes the people of God now is the heavenly fingerprint of faith in Jesus Christ. And even though participation in the New Covenant came through faith in Jesus and not ethnicity - as a Jew - the continuity to the Old Covenant and the twelve tribes of Israel with this New Covenant and the twelve apostles was important to convey the unity of what God had been doing with his people for a very long time.

Getting back to the problem the disciples had, they were no longer twelve in number since Judas was dead. Their vestry no longer had a quorum, shall we say. So, soon after Jesus ascended back into heaven, the Bible tells us that the remaining eleven disciples gathered together (with more than one hundred other followers together with them, by the way) and they formed a slate of replacement candidates to take the place of Judas. The two candidates that were selected had the essence of what the other eleven disciples had as well - they had been connected to Jesus all the way from the beginning at his baptism and had stayed with him until the end. It came down to Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. With the faithful work of deliberation complete, the eleven lifted up their two options to God in prayer and asked him to decide. God chose Matthias.

This got me thinking about how it is that we go about making choices, especially choices that carry with them a sense of magnitude in which we start to use the language of "seeking the will of God." How do we make godly choices - choices in accordance with the will of God?

I think that in some respects there are two categories of choices that we all make throughout our lives: choices where God says, "You are free to go ahead with either option,"

and choices where God has a clear opinion as to what would be the right choice in that instance.

Near the end of high school for me I spent a vast amount of time wrestling with what was God's will for my life – should I be a pilot or an architect. In my zealotry I had equated God's will with a career, which is to say, if I did not figure out the career that God wanted me to be in then I would be out of his will. I came to realize that that narrow understanding of God's will is not the best way to approach it.

I *do* feel that *some* people are called so clearly by God to certain situations and circumstances that for them to turn a blind eye to God would constitute being out of God's will. I say this when I think about people like Moses. But the vast majority of people are not called to a career with such clarity that should they not work in that field it would constitute being in opposition to God. For most of us it is less about what we are doing to fill our time or draw a paycheck and far more about what kind of people we are in the midst whatever career or circumstances we find ourselves in. Christian virtue and godliness are what we are all called to no matter what we are doing to draw a paycheck.

Don't worry. If God wants you to be doing something very specific he'll make it very clear. Otherwise, enjoy the God-given ability to choose and focus more on godly living in whatever the context might be because that is what every Christian is called to do regardless of circumstances.

It is within this freedom that we use the discipline of regular prayer to speak with God and share our hearts. When we come to God with humble hearts in prayer he then speaks to us through the prodding and guidance of his Holy Spirit to teach us to live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ. (Philippians 1:27)

But there are clearly things as well that God does have opinions about when I speak of holy living and godliness. How do we discern those things?

The easiest way to discern God's will on any given topic is to see what he has already said and done with other people that have been in that same or a similar situation in the Bible. The Bible is a faithful and trustworthy record of God's dealings with his people within his creation. "The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation."¹ Therefore, it is of supreme importance to seek God's opinion in our lives through his holy Scriptures. But we must be very careful to not treat the Bible as some sort of checklist for life. It is not a collection of self-help sayings wrapped up in heartwarming stories. It is the divinely revealed record of God's interactions with his people through time. In the same way we learn from other people's successes and failures we too can learn from the Bible by looking at how God is revealed through the whole story and also how people have responded to him through time and in human circumstances.

Some things in the Bible are very succinctly articulated. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40) For a touch more specificity one can also look to the Ten Commandments, or you could

¹ *Dei Verbum*, Chapter III.

spend some time with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 - 7 where he speaks to things like the relationship of anger to murder, the importance of reconciliation with someone you have hurt, he speaks of marriage, adultery, divorce, loving our enemies, the pitfalls of seeking earthly wealth, fasting, prayer, revenge, giving to the poor, the burden of worrying, and much more. The apostle Paul also can shed some light on the subject of godliness through all of his various letters to many early churches and believers who were trying to figure out what godly living and worship looked like in the decades after Jesus' ascension. Paul repeatedly tells us of our freedom in Christ but then he will also give us a list of behaviors to stop doing so that we can grow in the faith.

Now, to those of you who are concerned about the Old Testament laws as compared to the New Testament, let us remember that Jesus tells us that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17) Through fulfilling the law Jesus freed us from the sacrificial codes of the Old Testament, the dietary restrictions of the Jews, practices connected to ritual purity, as well as much of the ceremonial and cultural laws of the Old Covenant. But clearly there is much of the Old Testament law that is still in effect, otherwise New Testament freedom in Christ would mean that we could worship idols, lie, murder, dishonor our parents, steal, covet, commit adultery, and all while blowing off the Sabbath day. If a commandment is equally affirmed in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament, then we can know that it is still binding and in effect for us today.

In today's world we will often hear that you should obey your conscience. To that I wholeheartedly agree, but only if your conscience is subject to God and God alone. Everyone's conscience is formed by something. What is it that forms your conscience? What is guiding your decisions? Is it your upbringing? Is it your politics? Is it your fears? Is it your desires? Does a national poll stating that a majority of Americans favor something inherently make it right? Should our conscience be put to a vote? No. God's will is not a democracy. Our consciences must be formed through faithful daily reading of the Scriptures. They must be formed through humble and fervent prayer. They must be formed through the seeking of holy wisdom from God both directly from the Holy Spirit, and communally through the teachings and counsel of the faithful in the Church. We must flee from those who would condone and propagate those things that the Bible prohibits, and we must hold dear those things which God has given us to protect and guide us in holy living. Holy and sanctified choices do not earn me salvation, but they do confirm a heart that is truly devoted to God and to faith in Jesus Christ.

Choices ... How do we make them?

Do you seek the Lord's guidance through regular and humble prayer?

Do you diligently study and internalize the commands of the Bible?

Who has influenced your conscience? Who shapes your moral choices?

Do you seek the wise counsel of Biblically mature teachers and writers or do you seek the counsel and guidance of this world?

Do you sit in silence humbly listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit?

In just a minute we will all kneel and confess our sins to God. Why is it that we are asking for God's forgiveness? So "that we may delight in [God's] will, and walk in [God's] ways, to the glory of [God's] Name. Amen." (The General Confession, BCP 360)