

Lectionary 21 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
August 22, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In some churches this morning, you might hear that you have to make a choice for Jesus, because I guess Jesus can't make a choice for himself. Sure, Joshua this morning says "choose ye this day" and in the gospel a whole bunch of people choose to stop following Jesus. So, we can clearly hear in these readings that we just have to make the right choices. When Joshua tells us to choose, we should choose Jesus, and we should never choose to stop following Jesus.

But we don't see the effects of this preaching that we might expect within our world. We look out at our world and it doesn't really look like there's a whole lot of people who have chosen Jesus. We don't see a lot of people choosing to love and protect the least, the lost, the forgotten, the unlovable, the unforgiveable, and most vulnerable in our world. We don't see many people who regularly deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus, who sell all their possessions and give all the money to the poor. Our world isn't filled with people who regularly wake up and choose Jesus rather than themselves. Because if it were, if this preaching and choice theology really were effective, we'd see the Kingdom of God descending into our world on the backs of everyone who has chosen Jesus rightly.

The truth is that we can't simply choose Jesus, and choice theology isn't really that effective at making Christians. For everyone who has decided in their hearts that Jesus is the lord of their life, whatever that means, we see a whole lot of brokenness in our world. We still see racial injustice, hunger, poverty and inequality. We still hear cries for more war and more violence, all in the name of protecting people.

Sure, a choice theologian might say that all we need is for more people to make the choice for Jesus. But the problem is that given the choice, people don't actually seem to choose Jesus. If our world's brokenness is any indication, given the choice, we choose ourselves instead.

In our Gospel reading this morning, people stop following Jesus because his teachings are hard. Jesus was talking about eating flesh and drinking blood, which is grotesque, and for that place and time would not have been kosher. It was challenging for the community, and people left because of it. But today, it might be easy for us to say that Jesus was really talking about communion, and bread and wine, which isn't *that* hard a teaching. But overall, the truth is that the people who turn back are right. Jesus presents us with countless hard teachings that were challenging then and still are today. Even simple commands to love our neighbor come with hard truths. We are commanded to love our neighbor even when they are different from us, even when they hate us. Jesus teaches us to give up ourselves, to see the good of the least, the lost, the forgotten and the abandoned as our own good. Jesus teaches us that if we want to save our lives we must lose them. It's little wonder that many Christians, and many churches, want to reduce all those hard teachings to a simple choice, a yes or no proposition. The real problem is that, at the end of the day, choice theology is just words, and talk is cheap.

There's this car that I've seen around town; usually it's parked across the street from one of our local churches that is steeped in choice theology. Painted on the side of the car is the "Salvation Prayer," along with instructions to read it out loud. It is as though declaring out loud

that we've made a choice for Jesus would save us. Now, the words of the salvation prayer aren't so bad in themselves, but it's used as a kind of induction into choice theology. In truth, it's used like a magic spell, as if just saying the words would cause us to be saved—whether we mean them or not. But in truth it's just more talk, and given the choice between Jesus and the comfortable life we know, we choose ourselves.

We like our comfortable lives. Choice theology has become the way that we ignore Christ's hard teachings and still convince ourselves that we are good Christians who have made good choices. We've made our choice for Jesus, so we don't have to care about our neighbors.

And yet, despite the hard teachings of Jesus, and despite our own tendency to choose ourselves, when Jesus asks the twelve disciples if they are going to leave as well, Peter hits the nail on the head. His response goes down in liturgical history, "Lord to whom shall we go?" Leaving simply wasn't a choice for the twelve. Peter continues, "You have the words of eternal life, we believe and know that you are the holy one of God." Faith isn't a choice because belief is more than just an exercise for our minds. In fact, it might be better translated from the original Greek as "trust". We don't make a choice to trust someone, we just do. It's not something we have to talk ourselves into or work at. Real trust just happens.

While the reading from Joshua this morning certainly sounds like the people are being offered a choice, the attentive reader will notice that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm delivered the people from slavery in Egypt isn't on the list of choices. Joshua says "Choose ye this day between the gods of the Egyptians or the gods of the Ammonites." They don't get to choose our God, the God of Israel.

The people Israel are not known as people who had the good sense to choose the one true God. They didn't make the choice. They are the people that *God chose*. They are the chosen people of God, and so are we.

In being God's chosen people, we are gathered together in the church, and we are sent out into the world. We are empowered and built up by the Spirit and the sacraments to confront the brokenness of our world. As God's chosen people, we are invited to participate in God's life-giving and world-changing mission of justice, equality and peace. As God's chosen people, we are united with our brothers and sisters who share our pew, and with the brothers and sisters who share our world. We are united with all Christians throughout all time and space in Peter's simple response, "Lord to whom shall we go?" Where else can we find such truth, such grace, such forgiveness, such love, such life?

We encounter God, and God comes to us in the sacraments. In the waters of baptism our God comes to us, for us, to save us. Not because of some spell, magical ritual, or special salvation prayer, but because God has promised that in these waters we would join with Christ, the well-beloved Son, in death and resurrection. In these waters, we are chosen by God and our life with God begins. In these waters, the gift of faith is freely given. For all the grotesqueries of this morning's Gospel, Jesus is trying to stress that in this meal of bread and wine he is present, fully and totally, for us. So that our faith can be strengthened and we can see and touch and taste our savior. In the meal, Christ comes to us so that we might become what we eat, the Body of Christ for the world. Thanks be to God, Amen.