

Choices, Choices

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Crossroads Christian Church
Matthew 4:1-11 March 9, 2014 Lent 1 A

Choices, choices. Some are so easy that we call them no-brainers, but after we make them, we wonder where our brains were at the time. That's like when the checker at the grocery store asks "paper or plastic?" and we choose one, and then remember that we left the cloth shopping bags that we brought to help save the environment in the back of the car. Other choices are routine, like deciding what we want for lunch—or maybe not routine for our health, because the burger sounds more tasty and the salad more healthy. Some choices are life-changing, like responding to the question of "Will you marry me?" or deciding whether to enroll in college or enlist in the military or try and get a job when we graduate from high school. Others have a darker side that we may not recognize at the moment, like having one more drink before we drive home. Some choices are value-neutral, so that we don't feel guilty about the outcome, no matter what. Others compromise our integrity, maybe just a little bit, and we worry whether or not we'll get caught in a bind where we won't have a real choice anymore, but will end up selling our integrity, our values, our souls, bit by tiny bit.

Are you old enough to remember the comedian Jack Benny? For the younger folk here, he was a great funny man, a kind, gentle, generous man who pretended to be the world's biggest miser. In one of his most remembered routines, a stick-up-man jumps out of the alley, sticks a gun in Benny's face, and shouts "Your money or your life." L-o-n-g pause. "Well?" the crook demands. Benny replies, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking." For him, it was a tough choice.

There's an old story about choices where a mother is trying to wake up her son on a Sunday morning to get ready for church. He tried to ignore her by covering his head with the pillow, and finally said, "I don't want to go to church. I

have three good reasons: reason number one, the people there don't like me; reason number 2, I don't like them; and reason number 3, the sermons are boring." His mother sighs in exasperation and replied, "I'll give you three good reasons that you have to go. Reason number one, everyone expects you to be there; reason number 2, you're 37 years old and need to stop acting like a child; reason number 3, you're the minister and you have to preach."

Choices, choices. Our first scripture lesson was a familiar one, where Adam and Eve were given a paradise of easy living; food, comfort, companionship, beauty, and a relationship with the God who created them. Only one tree was forbidden; one that would give them "inside information;" the power of secret knowledge; to know what God knows. Anyone who has raised a four-year old will know what happens next. "I know how to do that. Gimme." Satan, the tempter, in the guise of a serpent, raised doubts. "God's lying. You won't die. Instead, you'll be like God." And we all know how that came out. Adam and Eve made choices to do the selfish thing, and when God challenged them on it, they lied and passed the buck. So they were separated from Eden, and the easy life became a whole lot harder.

Choices, choices. Our Gospel lesson takes us backward in Matthew from the turning point of Jesus' ministry, the Transfiguration, to a point before the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Temptations—and no, I don't mean the great Motown group.

Jesus had just been baptized and had just received God's blessing. What was his ministry to be? Jesus went on a forty-day spiritual retreat, we might call it; but not on a retreat center with other pilgrims and meals in the dining hall. He went into a rugged, dry, desolate wilderness. He was tempted; not just once near the end of his time there, but for the whole time. Jesus fasted. Think of the most hungry you've ever been; Jesus was much hungrier. Satan tempted

him—if you're really who you think you are, you can feed yourself by turning these rocks into bread. So Jesus was tempted both to prove himself and to break his fast by misusing his power. But no—Jesus knew that his strength came from God, not himself. Jesus knew scripture enough to answer, people don't live by bread alone.

Satan, nothing if not persistent, tempted him again, quoting scripture, this time. It's easy to quote scripture for your own purposes, and not for God's purposes—and said, "throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, with all the crowds gathered below, and let the angels catch you. Doesn't it say right there in Psalm 91, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone"? What a showstopper that would be! Everyone would know right from the beginning that you're the Messiah. With me as your press agent, you'll go far, kid." And Jesus replied, "It's God that you're putting to the test, not me. Nothing doing."

Finally Christ was offered the chance to rule the earth, to become king over all creation, but Jesus turned him down. "It is God who is ruler over all." These temptations were real, and Jesus had real choices to make, and he chose to be faithful.

It is Lent, a time of reflection, and a time of self-discipline. And yes, it's a time to make choices. You may want to reflect upon the choices you might have made that have been destructive, that have separated yourself from a loving relationship with God or with other people, or that have been harmful to your own well-being and health. Reflect, I said; don't wallow in despair or self-pity or guilt. Offer these broken choices up to God in confession, and know that God forgives. Receive that forgiveness. You may still have consequences to bear, but you will come to see yourself as you are—an imperfect but beloved child of God.

You are not defined by your bad choices, or the good ones, either. God loves you unconditionally and wants to be in a loving and positive relationship with you.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to make a list of five people in the church, and then pray for those people daily for five weeks. Remember homebound and inactive or nonresident members, too. Pray for them. If you miss a day or two, don't get discouraged—just start over. Your prayer list can include friends and relative strangers; people with health issues or healthy people; you can even choose them in random by covering your eyes and poking your finger at open pages in the church directory. At the end of 4 weeks, April 13, Palm Sunday, call or send a note to the people on your list to let them know that they've been in your prayers.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to make a choice that will improve your life. I'm not talking about doing something good to buy God's favor. Jesus Christ already did that for you. Just do it as a favor to yourself, and to other people in your life. Maybe it can be something to improve your health. Maybe it can be taking a step to mend a broken relationship. Maybe it can be in facing a moral dilemma, in standing up against taking ethical shortcuts at work. Maybe, if you're feeling down upon yourself, you can re-evaluate who you are as a beloved child of God, and name your strengths, your talents, your gifts, your blessings. Maybe it can be giving more of yourself in a loving relationship, or maybe in finding the strength to withdraw from an abusive relationship. Maybe it can be in naming a destructive habit and taking steps to overcoming it. Maybe it can be in telling someone that you love them, if you do and you're not in the habit of saying so. Maybe it can be in overcoming hurt feelings that have alienated you from the church, or from a family member. Whatever you choose, try it. Work on it. Maybe you'll succeed this time and maybe you won't, but that's okay. You gave it a good shot. Remember that whatever the choices

you make, you are still a child of a loving God. Loving you, redeeming you, forgiving you—these are choices that God has already made about you. You are a beloved child of God. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon