

Today our readings are all about choices. The challenge is of course that frequently choices are not always black or white and in the gray we walk a fine line between discerning the will of God and falling prey to our own willful desires. As we read in 1st Peter, "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) But if we use the gospel as our lens it can inform our decision-making, even in the face of difficult choices. I think that's where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit brings us together and when we open our hearts can bring us to making choices in accordance with God's will. That's why the church does not make decisions alone but always in council. The history of the early church is full of decisions that were made in council, from deciding to include gentiles and formulating the creeds, to today when we revise the prayer book, decide to ordain women, or affirm that there is no communion without baptism. Those decisions may not make everyone happy, and there are always consequences but they were the best, perhaps the most prayerful decisions that the councils could make at the time.

In our reading from Acts the Apostles have gathered with Jesus just before his Ascension. They ask Jesus the question about restoring the Kingdom of Israel, like "Are you gonna do it NOW?". That's a loaded question. They had been with him throughout his ministry hoping that in life he was the one who would restore the Kingdom of Israel. They had to get over their disappointment that he had died ignominiously without so doing. And they had to choose whether or not to continue to believe in him. Then Jesus arose from the dead and their hopes were rekindled and now he says that "no, that's not going to happen the way you had hoped but you are going to get power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. Then Jesus gives them a whole new mission. The disciples have to choose whether or not they are going to accept this mission. Then to top it off up and away he goes. Now they need to choose whether or not to carry on. Fortunately for us they chose to do so although it was going to lead to life of hardship as well as joy.

In our gospel lesson the choice may not be obvious but the consequences of that choice are apparent. Jesus is praying to his Father that he might be glorified and that he might glorify his Father in return. John's expository style is nothing if not circular! Jesus is preparing for his crucifixion and his death when he will leave his disciples. He is asking that his father protect them. "And now I am no longer in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (John 17:11). Much of the gospel of John is about choosing to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. Remember the story of the man who was born blind, how Jesus cured his blindness and he came to believe in contrast with the Pharisees, who refused to believe in the miracle that was before their very eyes, they refused to believe and remained spiritually blind.

Belief in Jesus leads to the relationship with God through Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. The disciples who chose to believe now belong to Jesus and they also now belong to the Father. Jesus is interceding on behalf of those who believe, not on behalf of the whole world. That distinction can feel shocking. We like to believe everyone is included. But it is not as exclusionary as it sounds. Everyone has a chance to choose to believe and having made that choice they then have to live with the consequences. It rather like what we say to those who want to offer communion to those who have not been baptized and who argue that we are not being hospitable when we set up a boundary, a

requirement that we must be baptized before we can receive communion. Everyone who offers hospitality has boundaries. We respond that baptism is open to everyone and so we say that we practice open baptism but not open communion - so the choice to believe in Jesus is an invitation to eternal life but we have to make the choice.

Even so choices are not always clear. Perhaps you may be familiar with the book *Silence* by Shusako Endo. It tells the story of a 17th century Portuguese Jesuit who goes to Japan in search of another Jesuit who has apostatized, meaning that he had publicly renounced his faith by trampling on the image of Christ set in a pavement. Apostasy is a terrible sin made more grievous by the desecration of the image of Christ whom the monk had sworn to love and to obey.

Initial successes by Jesuit missionaries in Japan were eventually squelched by the authorities and converts were persecuted and killed if they refused to renounce their beliefs. Rodrigues is captured and tortured by a local warlord. He is told to recant or else the villagers who have converted will be tortured and killed. He can't bring himself to tell them to apostatize – it goes against everything he believes in and it would mean that everything that the villagers sacrificed for their beliefs would be in vain. Rodrigues refuses and the villager are tortured and killed. All the while Rodrigues is praying and hoping to discern God's will. He is tormented by God's apparent silence. Rodrigues is taken to a pit where he is tortured and next to the pit he hears the groans and cries of others who are being tortured for their faith. In despair he hears Christ speak to him, urging him to apostatize, to go ahead and trample his image as he himself had been trampled by the world but that Christ will be with him. He is comforted and apostatizes.

Rodrigues has saved the lives of those who were imprisoned with him but he lives the rest of his life in Japan, he is forced to take a wife, and to work to prevent Christian religious items from being smuggled into the country. When his order hears about his apostasy he is expelled and defrocked. There are consequences for our decisions, even ones made for the right reasons. There is a grace-filled plot twist at the end of the novel that gives hope that God has not abandoned Rodrigues but has suffered alongside of him, justifying the kernel of faith that remained in Rodrigues' heart.

Choices: we are faced with choices all the time and some of them have greater consequences than others. Just look at the decision about whether or not to lift the shelter in place regulations that have been imposed in response to the pandemic. To lift them is to increase the likelihood that there will be a second wave of victims, to keep them in place is to further damage the economy and put even more people out of work. No matter what decision is made, people are going to suffer. We can only pray that the Holy Spirit will be with us as we decide how to proceed.

Our hope and faith is summed up in the last line of our reading from 1st Peter. "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." (1 Peter 5:10)

Amen

