

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 24, 2009
Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:11-20, John 15:16-17, and Matthew 21:28-32

CHOICES

“Do I have a choice?” one asks. Another replies, “No, not really.” But a third, standing back from the situation and untouched by it, declares coldly, “You always have a choice.”

Do we, really? True, people plead lack of choice to avoid responsibility for the decisions they are making, especially when they are causing someone else pain and hardship. In this recession, hundreds of thousands of people every month are hearing some variation on, “I’m sorry, we have no choice but to let you go.” Still, the question remains. How real are the choices of human beings, especially in life’s serious matters? Sure, in the supermarket aisles, we have an abundance of choices at the level of, “Which breakfast cereal?” but how much true choice do we have about ourselves (the people we become) and our lives (the way they turn out)?

Our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition has never cared much for human choice nor granted it much significance. We have seen God as the one who decides what will be and so have minimized the effectiveness of our own choices. There is a hymn which declares, “Whate’er my God ordains is right.” So, we have considered faith more a matter of accepting God’s will than of making good choices ourselves. Reformed faith has always insisted upon the absolute sovereignty and freedom of God in all things, but especially in matters of human destiny. God chooses. God decides. God knows what is best and determines what will be. No mere human being can obligate God in any way.

When Presbyterians have concentrated too much on the sovereignty of God, our faith has degenerated into fatalism, making us cold and dismissive. If whatever happens to people is the will of God, then why should their joy or suffering be any concern of mine? If all is predetermined, why rejoice over our gains or lament our losses? Just “take it as it comes.” Fatalism needs no hope, requires no faith beyond acceptance of the inevitable, and merely endures (as Stoically as possible) the emotional messiness of love. Sure, grief hurts, just as physical wounds hurt, but so what? Neither is allowed to touch the soul, which has been a great loss for us. Our strength in the face of life’s unfairness, our staunch acceptance of people’s suffering, our sometimes dismissive “What will be will be,” have been our tragic

weakness. We have been too strong and too sure. We need to wonder more, to laugh, and to cry. God has chosen to be vulnerable. Calvinists have too often chosen not to be.

Modern optimism exalted human choice, even as modern Western prosperity trivialized it. We would make our own future as the masters of our fate and captains of our souls, but as consumerism progressed, we made most of our choices by shopping around and by clicking the TV's remote channel changer.

Postmodern cynicism has taken fatalism away from theology and philosophy, giving it now to biology and the social sciences. When my fate is not already programmed into my genes, it's impressed upon me by my early childhood experiences. Choices? Hah, they're just a pretense, and what difference does it make anyway? The theologian Douglas John Hall contrasts modernity's exaggerated optimism with postmodern depression by using Greek mythology's figures of Prometheus and Sisyphus. Modern Western society imagined itself the Titan Prometheus, boldly storming heaven to steal fire from the gods and give it to earth's peoples. Postmodern society seems more like Sisyphus, condemned to the meaningless toil of rolling the same rock up the same hill every day only to stand exhausted and helpless as the rock rolls back down to the bottom where it will await him the next day.

Our Reformed tradition wants us always to hear Jesus saying, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." We have faith because God has chosen to be faithful. We hope because God has made promises that give us hope. "We love because God first loved us." The decision for my salvation was not made by me at a certain hour on a certain day; it was made by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he refused to save himself by turning back from the path of self-giving love. My salvation was his decision, not mine.

And yet, God made us able to respond freely and willingly to God's own love. The reason the Reformed tradition, at its best, insists upon the absolute freedom and sovereignty of God is only to reveal the wonder of God's grace – God's freely given love, mercy, and kindness. God, who could be utterly free of us has chosen to commit to us in love, and so by choice God is not free but self-bound to our welfare and our future.

Life in faith is a constant interplay between the person I have been and the person Christ calls me to become. God made love the context for human living and the rightful nature of it. God created human life to be relational, so our most important choices are not between virtue and vice but, rather, between love and indifference. It's not how clean and pure I keep myself that matters most but how much I let myself care about others. So, when I have a choice to make about the way I will live my life, the primary question is not, "How can I best make my plans work out?" but, rather, "What kind of person-in-relation-to-others am I choosing to be?" Friendship, respect and justice in the human community, fairness in

business dealings, and compassion for the vulnerable – these are the impulses of our real choices in faith.

Anyone who tries to absolutize human freedom of choice is naive indeed or else cruelly judgmental. Did I make myself? Can I control the forces that affect me? Do I determine my own destiny? What folly it is to imagine I do control my destiny, and what evils I will inflict upon myself and others if I try. Paul the apostle laments that the good he wants to do is what he fails to do and the harm he longs to avoid is exactly what he ends up doing. In despair of himself, he acknowledges that if his life depends upon his choices and his strength to carry them to completion, he is lost. But the same apostle tells the Philippians to work out their own salvation because God is at work within and among them. That's the interplay between choice and humble trust. We want to know which option will work out best. God wants to know *why* we choose one way over the other. Is it all about self, or will I let self go and choose what God's love requires?

It's not my love that matters supremely but God's love. That's where the sovereignty of God really comes to bear upon our choices in life: in the sovereignty of God's love for us and for this world God made. We start making better choices as we learn from Jesus Christ how very much we and our lives matter to God and how very much other people and their lives matter to God. Knowledge of God begins with the simple but astounding realization that God cares.

More than anything else, people need to know God cares. Then we can make choices that matter, whether our plans succeed or not. Then we can change our minds so God can change our hearts. The Bible is very much about calling us to change our minds and let it matter to us that God cares. But we need to know, to believe, to trust that God cares. I will make my choices matter to me when I have come to believe I matter. And I will make very different choices that are truly far better for me when I know and believe you matter, also. Being made Christian is a process of being changed in mind and heart so that what matters to God comes to matter to us, so we come to care about the things God cares about. In that process, our choices begin to matter very much, not because they determine life's outcomes, but because they join with the Spirit of God in healing and re-forming a life, a person, a soul God loves too much to let go. Amen.