



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 19, 2018

“Choices”

(John 6:67-68)

Rev. David K. Groth

“You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’” (John 6:67-68).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow His steps in the way that leads to life eternal; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

This next week, tens of thousands of college kids will be moving back to their dorms and apartments. For most of them, it will be with a sigh of relief. Ask what they like about being away from home, and most will say “the freedom.” There are no curfews. You are free to go to bed as late as they wish, get up as late as you wish, and to put on whatever clothes you want to, without comment or censorship. You are free to attend or not to attend your classes. (There are no truancy officers.) You are not compelled to go to church. You are not compelled to stay sober or celibate. If you want, you are free to burn through your debit card in one big night of drinking and entertainment and cap it off with a cheap tattoo. You are free to express the most outrageous and unfounded opinions, and even and publish them. You are free to discuss books you have not read, and to criticize people you have not met. You are free to choose your classes from a catalog of thousands. You are free to join any number of student clubs on campus. (Last year Jonathan chose a Sheepshead club, and a cheese club. That’s my boy!) You are free to cook whatever you want for dinner, or try to. One of my roommates caught a carp ice-fishing in the shallows of Lake Mendota. He tried to slow-roast it in the oven of our apartment. At the time, another of my roommates, a Muslim from Algiers was fasting in observance of Ramadan. He came down and took in the aroma of roast carp and said, “Man, that doesn’t even smell good to me!” But you are free to do that in college. Another of my roommates would take a head of iceberg lettuce, punch out the core, fill up the hole with salad dressing, and eat it, standing over the sink. If the head was too big, he would wrap it back up in the bag and put it in the frig for the rest of us to enjoy.

Freedom. We love the word. We love the concept. We love the sound of it. It is the most sacred of Western values. We live for it, are prepared to kill for it and to die for it. And yet, we

also know freedom is not all that it's cracked up to be. After all, there are consequences when we make poor choices with our freedom, consequences such as addictions, unexpected pregnancies, STD's, expulsion from school, bankruptcy, broken relationships, lost jobs, imprisonment . . . I submit the list of consequences is far longer than the list of the freedoms we have.

Our Gospel lesson is, to an extent, about freedom, the freedom God gives each of us. We can even choose, if we want, to turn our backs on him, and the consequences to that are nearly unthinkable.

Jesus has just fed the thousands with five barley loaves and two fish. Impressed by his miracles and teachings, that crowd is following him. It would have been a great opportunity to give their itching ears what they want, and build on the momentum. Instead, Jesus, begins to say some strange things. "I am the bread of life," he says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." It's a little odd to his listeners, but they can look past that so long as he keeps popping off miracles for them. But then he goes in deeper: "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, there is no life in you."

Now his listeners are really scratching their heads. "What on earth? Surely he doesn't mean it, does he? Surely he is not being literal, is he?" Can you see the bewilderment on their faces?

One of my Old Testament professors at the seminary was by the name of Horace Hummel. Gail loved him. He was a real gentleman. "Dapper" was the word she used for him. But she didn't see him in the classroom. In any event, after one particularly hard lesson in Hebrew syntax, he paused and shook his head in discouragement and said, "You guys are all looking at me like cows staring at a new fence!"

That's probably what that crowd looked like 2000 years ago. "Eat his flesh?" "Drink his blood?" What could be more shocking, more nauseating? This is not a crowd-pleasing concept. Some say out loud what all are thinking, "This is a difficult teaching. Who can accept it?" Jesus

asks, “Does this offend you?” And the answer comes in verse 66: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” They made a choice that day. They exercised their freedom and chose not be his disciples of Christ. Many who thought it would be fun and fascinating to follow him, decided that Christian discipleship was not for them after all. They decided it was not going to be as fashionable as they thought it might be. If Jesus had posted this little sermon on Facebook, he would have received thousands of thumbs down. This sermon of Jesus doesn’t go over very well at all. Eat his flesh? Drink his blood? This sermon broke up that crowd and sent them on their way more efficiently than a canister of tear gas.

Remember, when God is working through means (through his Word, Baptism, Lord’s Supper), when God is working through these means by which he gives us grace, we can resist him. We can walk away from Almighty God. When God speaks to us directly, does something to us directly, there’s no resisting God. But with the means of grace, we can push back. We can despise preaching and the Word. We can dismiss Holy Baptism as meaningless and exclude ourselves from the Supper. We can use the freedom God gives us to reject the gifts that God would give us, and even the giver of the gifts.

And notice: the really frightening part of this text is that Jesus lets them go! He lets them choose not to be his people. He’s sad about it, frustrated and dejected, but he lets them go. He doesn’t even try to corral them, convince them, convert them. He doesn’t beg them to stay, or try to persuade them that it’s in their best interest to stay. No. He treats them as adults, and treats us as adults, as people who have freedom. He does not treat them or us as objects to shove around. Make no mistake: those people were walking away from their Savior.

At any given moment, on any given day, *you* can choose to be deeply offended by just about anything (if you want to), from the idea of the real presence in the Lord’s Supper, to the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. You can

choose to have your nose put out of joint by just about anything, and walk away from this church, or walk away from God himself. It happens. It happens when people don't get their way. It can happen when God doesn't give the miracle for which you were praying. It can happen when his Word falls flat on your ears, or the pastor says something that offends you. It can happen when we figure the cost of being a disciple is too high. It can happen when you come to church for the first time and no one bothers to greet you, or introduce themselves to you, or welcome you. It can happen when you come back to church after a long winters' absence, and no one remembers to celebrate your return. Turning our backs on a church or on God can happen so easily, so quietly, almost imperceptibly.

Jesus turned to the twelve and asked, "Do you also want to leave?" Notice again how he treats them like adults. If one or two of them had raised their hands and said, "Yeah, I think I'm out", he would have let them go too, and given what's at stake that's frightening. It's not that he doesn't care. He cares about you more than anyone else on earth could care. He loves more than anyone else on earth could love you. But he will force no one to love him. He will compel no one to march in step behind him. He will drag no one into this church or any other church to hear his Word, or to baptize an infant. He will force feed no one his body and blood. He gives us the freedom to reject him and his means of grace.

So he looks at his disciples and asks, "Are you going to leave me too?" Peter responds, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In other words, what other options do we have? Of course there are hundreds of other gods (from Muhammad to your own personal happiness), there are hundreds of other gods all with a small g. And if we want, we can use our God-given freedom to bow down and worship and follow them. But there's only one true God, and he has the words of eternal life. Don't take my word for it. Listen to him. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the

Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). Don’t take my word for it. Listen to his Word which says, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)

As we talk about freedom and choices, let’s be clear: it is not the choices we make that save us. Jesus is our Savior, and if we are saved, he deserves 100 percent of the credit, not 90 or even 99 percent. It’s his choices that save us. Jesus said very clearly, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn. 15:16). It is God alone who makes it possible for us to stand and confess the faith. “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ but by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). “You are a *chosen* people, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9). “This is love”, wrote John, “Not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10). We have the freedom to reject him, but we do not have the freedom nor the inclination to choose him.

So the big choices belong to God. He made the decision to go to Jerusalem rather than stay in the safety of Galilee. He made the decision to say and do provocative things (like turning over the tables) and he knew this would stir up opposition. The decision to mount no defense for himself, either with words or with angels. The choice to bear the lashes on his back and the nails going through his limbs. He made the choice to be our sin-bearer, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. He made the decision to stay fixed on the cross and the focus of Father’s wrath until all penalty for our sin was paid for. The big choices belong to God. He is the Savior.

But then there follow all kinds of smaller choices that do rest in your hands, daily choices through which we become whom God wants us to be. How we spend our discretionary income: those are choices we make. If we want we can buy big, expensive toys, or give children a Christian education. With our discretionary time we can choose to play addictive video games, or serve in the community, volunteer in the church. We can vote, or choose

not to. We can drop the kids off for Sunday School and go out for breakfast, or come inside with them for Bible Study. All kinds of little choices to make with the freedom God gives us. If you want, you can commit your life to another “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health” and find a way to build compatibility, or you can just sort of shack up for a time and test the compatibility. We can keep God at arm’s length, or allow him in. We can choose to be silent, or choose to take a stand and confess the faith we’ve been given. We can go the way of the crowd, or the way of the Lord.

That we are God’s people is due to choices made by the Lord. *How* we will be his people, how we will follow him and serve him is to a large extent the product of our own choices.

Please, don’t play at being a Christian. Don’t dabble in it. Don’t admire Jesus from a distance. Follow him. Your Christian faith is not just another hobby. It is your life and your salvation.

“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked his friends. Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Amen.

