

**“WHAT DO WE CHOOSE?”**

**2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45**

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We all know what it's like. It's Saturday, your day off, and you've just gotten horizontal on the couch with a baseball game in front of you, and the phone rings. It's your neighbor from down the street. In a moment of over-the-back-fence neighborly camaraderie, you offered to help him install his new blinds when they came in. They just came in and he's good to go. . .

Or you and your partner had planned a quiet dinner out –good dinner, quiet time for you—and then your mother calls and tells you that Great Aunt Agnes is visiting and there's going to be a family dinner that night with all your least favorite relatives. And worse, Uncle Fred is cooking, and you know what Uncle Fred's cooking is like!

Choices. We make them every day, concerning matters great and small and everything in between. What we wear, what we eat, where we work, how we spend our money, how we give our time and our gifts. Sometimes choices are easy, either because they are of small import or because what we want lines up exactly with what we think we should want, and we're not even aware that we are choosing. Other times, though, there's what we want over here, and what we know or think or suppose we should do somewhere way out there, and in the distance between those two, we grit our teeth, and decide. . .What?

This morning's gospel reading documents such an episode in the life of Jesus. On the surface of it, it looks like a “typical” healing story. A leper comes to Jesus, begging him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” And Jesus, moved, stretches out his hand, touches him, and says to him, “I do choose. Be made clean.” Simple. Yes? But this is one of those texts where we have to look carefully at the words. Those of you who are reading along in the pew Bibles might notice that the NRSV text reads that Jesus was moved by pity, but a text note tells us that many old manuscripts say that Jesus was moved by anger. That's a very different reading. And if we look forward in the story, there are some other interesting word anomalies. After healing the man, Jesus spoke sternly with him—that word “sternly” is usually translated as “harshly.” And then the text reads that Jesus sent him away; but, again, the usual translation for “sent him away” would be “cast him out.” It's the same verb that's used when Jesus casts out demons. Interesting.

So, many commentators would suggest that the real translation of this story should be that the man came begging to be healed; Jesus, though angry, healed him, then spoke harshly to him and tried to put as much distance as possible between himself and the leper. Why was Jesus angry? Some would say he was just worn out. He kept trying to get away by himself to pray, but everywhere he went the crowds pursued him. Others would suggest that Jesus wanted to focus his ministry on preaching the gospel, but the crowds came out to see miracles, healings. They wanted him to be more magician than theologian; and on this one day, as he was walking down the road, importuned by yet one more who wanted him to perform, it was just too much. Jesus was in a bad mood.

Think about that for a minute. Jesus in a bad mood. It does not fit neatly into our image of him: the Divine One, the Son of God, he who gave his life to save sinners. In a bad mood. It is a troubling thought, troubling enough that the translators of the gospel stretched as far as they could to soften the harshness of Jesus' response so that they and we would not be so troubled.

But I'm not sure they did us any favors. The Leper said to Jesus, "If you so choose, you can heal me." And Jesus responded, "I do so choose. Be made clean." I'm not sure it serves us well to have a picture of Jesus as always feeling kind and generous, so that his acts of kindness, generosity, and healing are simple, unambiguous, unaccompanied by struggle. I am, in fact, more intrigued, more drawn into this story if Jesus had to choke out, "I so choose," with set jaw and gritted teeth. Because then maybe this Jesus, our Jesus, can understand me and you and all of us here as we seek to live our lives as Christians.

Maybe there are some few saints among us who, in their lifetimes, become so spiritually mature that the alignment of their will with God's will is easy, fluid, a matter of course. But for the rest of us, I think, there are always going to be times—lots of times for most of us--when we know what is right, and we will set our wills and our actions to doing it, but it's not easy. We do what we should do ungracefully, or conflictedly, or even angrily. I remember once visiting a seminary classmate of mine, an Episcopal priest in a small parish in the Napa Valley. She came to the invitation to the morning offering, saying, "This is the place where I am to invite you to give with glad and generous hearts because God loves a cheerful giver. Well, I will tell you also that I believe that God respects the giver who hasn't quite made it to cheerful, but gives anyway because he or she knows it to be good, and prays that cheerfulness will come along in time." I, along with the rest of the small congregation, squirmed a little as we smiled. Her comment struck close to home.

The philosopher Aristotle wrote that the moral line between childhood and adulthood is the line between voluntary and chosen behavior. To act voluntarily, to do what you want to do, that takes a sense of self and volition, and maybe mastery of particular skills that allow you to do that which you want. But chosen behavior, that is behavior that goes beyond instinct, feeling, and desire, to a world of moral and intellectual complexity where we consider and either accept or discard actions based on principle, what we believe, more than what we desire.

I think Aristotle's distinction is helpful, especially in this culture where there is so much that oversimplifies moral and spiritual life, assuring us that we can trust our feelings and instincts, as if we don't all know from the time we're four years old that the gulf between what we want to do and what we should do is often huge.

There are a lot of voices these days advising us to give in to desire, whether our desire be for chocolate, forbidden relationships, or a brand new Hummer. I would offer alongside of Madison Avenue and pop psychology self-help manuals the image of Jesus walking down a dusty highway in Galilee, tired, weary of the crowds, wondering if he will ever be to the people anything but a one-night miracle man. He's probably thinking he would be glad never to do another healing or miracle ever again. And then this leper comes up to him, and begs, "If you choose, you can make

me whole.” He doesn’t ask Jesus if he wants to heal him, only if he will choose to heal him. And there stands the savior of the world—angry to be put on the spot this way, so resentful that even this moment of privacy is shot. He is not overly gracious in his words; there’s nothing warm and fuzzy about this healing. But Jesus does it. Because that’s who he is. Because it’s the right thing to do. He chooses to heal the leper.

So think of that image the next time you are faced with a choice where you know what the right one is and you just, for whatever reasons, don’t want to do it. You’re in good company. Even Jesus felt that way sometimes. Even all those whom we call saints, ancient and contemporary, had their moments as well, I assume. So, get up off the couch and help your neighbor with his blinds. Eat your Uncle Fred’s cooking with a cheerful smile even if you are whining within. Make the other choices that come your way with all the integrity you can muster. Remember that the ability to truly choose is the gift of our maturity, and thank God for it, even if some days you give thanks with clenched jaw and gritted teeth. Amen.