

## Choices

Once there was a Saturday ecumenical gathering in a local church in a large city. All the churches in the area were represented. That afternoon as the gathering was in session, a church secretary rushed in shouting, "The building's on fire! The building's on fire!" Confusion reigned as each church group came together and did what came natural.

The Methodists gathered in a corner to pray. The Baptists cried, "Where's the water?" The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings. The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring that the fire was evil. The Roman Catholics passed a plate to cover the damages. The Unitarians reasoned that the fire would burn itself out if given the chance. The Independent congregations shouted, "Every one for himself!" The Fundamentalists proclaimed, "It's the vengeance of God." The Christian Scientists concluded there was no real fire. The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a written report. The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out. And the church secretary grabbed a fire

extinguisher and put out the fire.

The choices we make have consequences. We can respond to a fire, or not respond to a fire, or respond in a way that is completely inappropriate. In the church secretary's case, her actions actually made a difference, saving the building and maybe even saving people.

Often the choices we make impact on the happiness and well-being of our family and friends. They help or hurt ourselves and other people. They impact our community, our church and even our world.

Today's gospel is one of Jesus' shorter parables, just a few lines. It begins with the question: What do you think? A man had two sons. One always said yes to his father. In fact, whenever the father was around, he was always careful to say what the father wanted to hear. But he never did anything.

The other was a little rebellious, not very religious in speech, not always the most deferring in his manner. From time to

time he would raise questions, and once in a while he would say “no,” but he always did what was right, always.

Now, tell me, Jesus says: “which one did the will of his father?”

Throughout our lives, Jesus is saying, we make choices that are either consistent or inconsistent with the will of God. We choose and make decisions that are either life-affirming or life-denying. In school we choose to learn or not to learn. We meander through an ever-changing collection of relationships. We pick friends and discard them. We make alliances and then break them. In our morality it’s the same thing. We choose to tell the truth or tell lies; to be honest or dishonest; to be generous or stingy; to show compassion or indifference; to care for others or only for ourselves.

Choices – we make them all the time. Some choices are minor, like what flavor ice cream do I want to eat? But other choices are major and have a profound impact on our lives: Should I marry and whom? What career path should I follow? Where should I live? Should I give priority to my family or my job? Should I plan to keep living in my own

home or move to a retirement community? How should I plan my estate and to whom should I give my assets? And the list goes on....choices all.

All of us find ourselves making important choices every day of our lives – choices that have a profound impact on our character. We choose to cheat on our tax returns or we choose not to. We choose to be faithful to our spouse or we choose not to. We choose to squander our possessions or to give generously to worthy causes. We choose to get involved with improper or even illegal business practices or to maintain our honesty and integrity. We choose to tell the truth to the people we love or we choose to lie and deceive and live a phony and hypocritical life.

Do you remember Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? His portrait was that of a handsome young man, but slowly by his hurtful, spiteful conduct, his insensitive and cruel actions to the people who were closest to him, the portrait transforms into a hideous creature that he could barely look upon. Dorian Gray became what he detested by his own behavior. It didn't happen immediately, but over a

period of time in which a man of enormous potential transformed into a truly awful human being.

C.S. Lewis said that people often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, “If you keep a lot of rules, I’ll reward you, and if you don’t, I’ll do the other thing.”

Lewis says he is pretty sure that’s not the way it works. Instead, he says, morality is probably much more like this: Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. Through choice after choice after choice, you are slowly turning your life into something heavenly or into something hellish – you are becoming a creature that is in harmony with God or a creature that is at war with God.

Every choice we make has some kind of moral undertone. Through those choices you begin to turn yourself into a particular kind of human being. What you are today is built upon all the little choices that you have made along the way.

A dear friend of mine is Ted Schneider, who is now the retired Lutheran Bishop of the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. Before becoming bishop, Ted and his wife Doris lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where he was a parish pastor.

Throughout their married lives he and Doris had never owned their own home. The couple had always lived in a parsonage. However, the position of Bishop of Washington did not come with a parsonage, and so for the first time in their married lives they had to buy a home. Washington housing prices were high and Ted's salary was not extravagant.

After an exhausting search, Ted and Doris found what they thought was the perfect house in northern Virginia. The next step was to qualify for a mortgage. As part of the process, the bank asked them to supply a budget of their income and expenses. The mortgage officer in examining the budget noticed that their charitable contributions were unusually high. Ted had tithed his salary – 10% – from his earliest days as a pastor. The banker could not believe how much

money Ted and his wife were giving to charity. He looked up at the couple and said to them, “You know, if you were to cut this figure in half, I could qualify you for this mortgage.”

Without a second thought, Ted replied, “Everything in our budget is negotiable except that figure. We tithe because that’s who we are. We can’t cut our giving without compromising our deepest values.”

At that moment Ted and Doris had to make a choice on whether to compromise on what they held inviolate. They passed the test.

It’s choices like that – some of them major, some of them minor –that shape our lives.

Now here is the good news: you can change who you are by changing the choices you make. Maybe you are not happy with the choices you have made in life. You have made some bad choices along the way. You may think there is an inevitable direction to your life. Perhaps you are even fatalistic that there is nothing you can do to turn your life

around, but that is not so. The point of Jesus' story is to give you time to make some other choices, and to bend your life again toward God and the things of God while you still have the opportunity.

Take Alfred Nobel, for example. He was a Swedish industrialist who made his fortune in munitions. One morning Alfred Nobel sat at his breakfast table reading his own obituary in the newspaper. Somehow the paper had confused him with his brother. So there he was, reading how he would be remembered after he died. And what he read he did not like. His obituary focused on war and armaments and gunpowder, and how he made his millions making war more deadly and destructive.

Reading his obituary changed Alfred Nobel's life, and he resolved to spend the millions he made from war to promote the cause of peace, with one of his first acts being to establish the Nobel Peace Prize.

Alfred Nobel had to make a choice about the direction of his life. So do us all. We would do well to ask ourselves some

questions: Are we living our lives in accord with our deepest held values and beliefs? Do we base our decisions on principle or self-interest? Are we taking risks and short-cuts that may lead us into quicksand? Is the tower of human achievement and success constructed at the cost of our own personal integrity? And most important of all, how does Jesus Christ affect the decisions we make and the life we live?

So what are you waiting for? When God calls you to do something, do it! Don't just "talk the talk" but walk it. Do the right thing, for heaven's sake. Let your light shine and let your life go.

Dr. Gary Nicolosi

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Text – Mathew 21: 23-32

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