

“Where Else Can We Go?”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Pentecost 14B 2018

John 6: 56-69 (& Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18)

What’s really standing out to me today is choosing—and the difference it makes. In the first reading, Joshua is just about to lead the Israelites into the promised land. They’ve been working toward this moment for 40 years but before they get there, Joshua pauses. He gets everyone together, and he lays out a fundamental choice: serve the gods of Egypt or serve the Lord. He says: “*Choose* this day whom you will serve.”

And there’s a similar question that Jesus puts to his disciples. Jesus has been teaching some hard stuff and it’s too much for a lot of the people who have been following him. They reach a breaking point where they drop out from the Jesus school—they stop following him. Jesus notices how attendance is falling off and he turns to the inner circle—the twelve—and he says to them: “Do you also wish to go away?” Basically, do you want to stop following, too? Do you want to make the choice that takes you off this path?

These are good readings for today when Sean and Victoria have chosen to have their son, Anthony, baptized. In their own way, they’ve said “as for us and our household, we will serve the Lord.” That’s a choice—the choice to baptize and raise your children in a church—that is not anywhere near as common as it once was.

I grew up in a time when baptizing your child wasn’t really a choice—it was an expectation. If you were Christian—of whatever tradition—you got your children baptized. There was really no decision or choice to speak of.

But we are in a different time—and I know there are some who are missing the way it was before. And I know it’s hard, particularly for parents whose adult children are not in church—and whose grandchildren have not been baptized. But I also think there is an upside. People who come to church—parents who bring their children to be baptized are here because this really matters to them. It’s a choice not an expectation.

At this point in the sermon, I’m waiting for one of my seminary professors to come in and start correcting my theology. It’s one of Luther’s core insights that we don’t choose God, God chooses us. When Luther talks about free will he says we only have the freedom to reject God. We can go away. We can say no on our own. That’s our freedom. God chooses us and we can say “no thanks.” But if somehow we are able to say yes, we don’t do that on our own. If we can say “yes” to following Jesus, it’s because the Spirit of God is at work in us.

I do basically believe this because, as Charlie White says, “Every good thing I do, I know it comes from God.” And I also think we have some kind of choice. Being able to choose seems kind of basic to being a human being. But choice is a complicated thing—and what our choices are is affected by so many things. I know that so many of my choices are made from a place of great privilege—I’m not worried about having enough to eat or whether we can pay the rent or make it through the day alive.

Paul and I have made a big choice recently. That choice was to take our daughter Sarah out of public school and enroll her in a private school for kids with learning differences. Sarah has some very serious learning disabilities. Over the past year, we have watched her get more and more discouraged and start to give up.

So, rather than the public school summer program we enrolled her at the Lab School. When we visited at the end of the summer program, we saw something that we had never seen before—Sarah was so relaxed and happy and she fit in like a hand in a glove. She made some impressive progress in reading—and even more, she has her spark back. She’s reading all over the place.

We are at the beginning of a process of trying to get the school system to pay for Sarah’s education because she can’t get what she needs in the public school. A few days ago, we walked out of a meeting that made it clear we are in for a very adversarial process. We were standing outside the elementary school that is filled with 13 years of memories—most of them positive. And our lawyer asked us what we wanted to do. He said, “You could call it quits right now, and just walk right back in.”

Neither Paul or I hesitated in our response. “Sarah is going to Lab.” That’s where the words of life are. After seeing what it was like when she was there in the summer—how she flourished—there is no turning back. It didn’t even feel like a choice—there was really no other answer.

Of course, we wish the path ahead looked clearer and easier—that DCPS would support us without a battle. But we can’t say anything but yes to this path—even though it will be filled with struggle—because we’ve seen how this is where Sarah can have the fullest life possible.

I think Peter is talking about the same kind of thing when he answers Jesus. Like our lawyer, Jesus asks, “Do you want to turn back? Do you want to call it quits?” And Peter, speaking for the twelve, says: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Peter and the rest of the twelve can’t say anything else but yes. They’ve experienced something in Jesus—in what he says and does—that is so filled with life—it doesn’t compare to anything else. How could they do anything but stick with him?

But we know the rest of the story. They don’t all stick with him. Judas betrays him. Peter says he doesn’t know him. And, all of them go into hiding.

A similar thing happens with the Israelites who promise from the bottom of their hearts that they will serve the Lord. Before you know it, they are worshiping other gods—again.

This is our story, too. It takes different forms in each of us. We have our intentions about coming to church, about being a better friend, about being kinder and more patient, about really doing something about an injustice that makes us angry. In most cases, our problem isn’t figuring out what Jesus would do. Our problem is actually doing it. We know what the path of life is—we just keep getting off it.

So, thank *God*, that God comes to us again and again—not just once in our baptism but in Holy Communion, in words of Scripture, in the words and deeds of the community around us. God comes with a word of forgiveness. A word of unwavering love. A word that puts fear in its place. A word that gets us back on the path of life.

A word that makes us wonder how we could say anything other than “Yes!”

Thanks be to God. Amen.