



"If You Choose"

Joshua 24:1-18 and Mark 1:40-45

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"If you choose. If you choose, you can make me clean." All three synoptic gospels — Mathew, Mark, and Luke — all of them tell this story of Jesus healing a leper. Mark tells it early on, though. Chapter one. The first thing he and the disciples do is travel to Capernaum, where he casts a demon out of a man in the synagogue. Soon after, he heals a woman of a fever. Then he travels to Galilee, where the leper comes to him. And it's at the end of this story, at the end of this opening chapter of the Gospel, that people "from every quarter" begin to seek him out.

The progression of all this is fascinating to me. From his very first healing miracle, Jesus catches people's attention. People are amazed and afraid and curious and hopeful from the very beginning. They talk about him. A few even approach him. It's not until he says, "I do choose; I choose to heal you" that people absolutely flock to him.

This makes sense to me. After all, who doesn't want to be chosen?

When my brother was in third grade, his friends were trying out for the baseball team. So he, too, went to practice every day that week. And he complained about practice every day that week. He hated the drills and the running and being out in the heat. So I foolishly thought he'd be relieved when he didn't make the team. He was not relieved. He was heartbroken.

I remember saying to him, "But why are you so upset? You HATE baseball!" He looked at me for a moment, and then he said in a small, hurt voice, "Yeah, but it stinks to be left out."

I had missed it. It wasn't that he wanted to play baseball. He really didn't care about playing baseball. He cared about being on the team. He wanted to belong. He wanted to be wanted.

Who doesn't?

The leper who approaches Jesus... I wonder what he sounds like. Does his voice tremble? Or is his speech solid and defiant? I can imagine both.

Lepers didn't have it easy. Their skin was diseased, but their whole personhood suffered. Leviticus, the book of the law, devotes an entire chapter, an entire 59 verses, to the treatment of lepers. They are to wear torn clothing, and they are to cry out in warning, "Unclean! Unclean!" ahead of themselves. They are to live alone. Their entire existence is one of isolation.

So for the leper to stop Jesus and ask him to heal him — not only is he breaking the rules, he's asking Jesus to break the rules, too. He knows what Jesus can do; the question seems to be what Jesus will choose to do.

"If you choose," the leper says. And in the very next word, even before Jesus answers, scripture tells us Jesus was "moved with pity." That's how our translation this morning puts it. There's actually a bit of debate about this. In the Greek, it's *splagchnizomai*. Some say it's best understood as "moved with pity or compassion." Others say it's "moved with anger." We debate the proper way to express it, because literally, it means "to be moved deeply, down in one's bowels." You see why we've tried to say it differently. But I bet you know that feeling. That gut feeling you get when you instinctively know

something is right or something is wrong. The feeling you get when you realize the significance of the moment in front of you.

When the leper approaches him, I imagine Jesus feels both compassion and anger. Compassion for the man, and anger for the circumstances that surround him. But the text tells us he feels something else, too, something seeded far deeper than any emotion.

Because in addition to everything else he was, Jesus was a devout Jew. And any good Jew, upon being asked to make a choice — they would hear the proposition laid out in front of them but they would also hear the words Francois read earlier, words that an observant Jew would have imprinted on their heart.

Joshua is at the end of his life, and before he leaves this world for the next, he reminds the Israelites of God's faithfulness. He recites their story — the story of God's presence in their lives and the story of God's promises fulfilled. And then he says: "Choose this day whom you will serve."

The Israelites were living in a time and a place where there were countless other gods they could pledge their allegiance to. (The same is true for us today. It has always been true.) Joshua says to his people, to remind them and encourage them: "God has always chosen you. So now the choice is yours."

If I understand the text, when Jesus hears the leper say, "If you choose, you can make me clean," he also hears Joshua saying, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

So does Jesus choose the leper? Or does Jesus choose God? The end result is the same: the leper is healed. So perhaps it is the smallest of nuances. But I believe that when Jesus says, "I do choose," in that moment, before anything else, Jesus is choosing God. He is making the choice, yet again, to serve Good and live by God's way in this world. And it is for that reason, it is because of that first choice, that he can then

choose to heal the leper. Because to choose God is to choose one another. To choose life and dignity and wholeness for one another.

Have you ever heard about Ruth Coker Burks?¹

In 1984, Ruth Coker Burks was 25 years old, visiting a friend in the hospital. She noticed a door down a different hallway that was taped off, a door that nurses didn't walk through without drawing straws to see who had to do it. Inside was a man dying of AIDS, except this was a time when we didn't yet call it AIDS. The first course of treatment was to isolate the patients, to protect ourselves from them.

To this day, Ruth can't tell you why she walked through that door. It was something of a divine nudge, she says. She can't explain it any other way. The young man was skeletal, and wanted nothing more than to see his mother before he died.

She walked out to tell the nurses, who laughed. They said, "Honey, his mother's not coming. He's been here six weeks. Nobody's been here, and nobody's coming."

So she sat with that young man for 13 hours, until he took his last breath. And after his death, when his parents refused to claim his ashes, she buried him in her family's cemetery plot.

Ruth Coker Burks became known as one willing to care for AIDS patients. She estimates that she sat alongside over 1,000 of them, and 43 are buried with her family. She learned to say the funerals herself after being turned down by preachers and priests too many times. We, the church, have not always been on the right side of history. Even so, she said, it never made her question her faith. "I knew what I was doing was right," she said. "I knew I was doing what God asked of me. It wasn't a voice from the sky. It was something I knew deep in my soul."

Splagchnizomai. It's something beyond compassion or anger. It's something stronger

¹ The story of Ruth Coker Burks was shared by Taylor Lewis Guthrie Hartman, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Statesboro, GA, in a paper presented to By the Vine in May 2017.

than any emotion. It's a gut-level recognition of the call of God upon our lives, which means it's responsibility and obligation, in the holiest and most faithful way those words can possibly be understood.

Our choices matter. C. S. Lewis says it this way: "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 than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred. To be the one kind of creature is heaven; it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. And each of us, in every moment, is progressing toward one state or the other."

"If you choose," the leper says. "I do choose," Jesus says. "I choose health and wholeness and dignity and freedom for you." And then Jesus heals him. In word and in action, Jesus chooses a man no one else would touch with a ten-foot pole. Where everyone else sees a monster, a danger, a risk, an outrage, an outsider, an other, Jesus sees the very image of God.

The Washington National Cathedral issued a statement this past week, reflecting on our common life as Americans.² It reads, in part: "We have come to accept a level of insult and abuse in political discourse that violates each person's sacred identity as a child of God. We have come to accept as normal a steady stream of language and accusations coming from the highest office in the land that play to racist elements in society. This week, [we] crossed another threshold. Not only did [the president] insult a leader in the fight for racial justice and

equality for all persons; not only did he savage the nations from which immigrants to this country have come; but now he has condemned the residents of an entire American city. Where will we go from here?"

This, of course, following in the wake of racial slurs against four sitting Congresswomen, leading to a rally full of people chanting "Send her home!" referring to Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar.

"Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua says. "I do choose," Jesus says. "I choose you. Be made well. Be whole and healthy and hold your head high."

But we the people of the United States, we have said, "Go back where you came from."

Jesus could have said the same. He could have. But to say that is not of the Gospel. To say that is to serve the gods of control and power and self-preservation, not the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Choose this day whom, or what, you will serve.

"When does silence become complicity?" the National Cathedral asked. "What will it take for all of us to say that we have had enough? The question is now less about the president's sense of decency, but of ours. As [people] of faith who believe in the sacredness of every single human being, the time for silence is over. We must boldly stand witness against this bigotry, hatred, and intolerance. To [choose] silence in the face of such rhetoric is to condone the violence of these words. We are compelled instead to [choose] every opportunity to oppose such indecency and dehumanization, whether it comes through words or actions."

Now, I know there are those that would prefer this space, this sanctuary, be a place set apart from the rest of the world, a place of respite from the news and noise and everything else.

² "Have We No Decency? A Response to President Trump," July 30, 2019, accessed online: cathedral.org/have-we-no-decency-a-response-to-president-trump.html

But no less a preacher than our own David H. C. Read stood in this pulpit and said, on the occasion of his 25th anniversary as your pastor, "Karl Barth said the preacher is the one who stands with the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other. All true preaching is rooted in the Word of God revealed in the Bible. But the sermon is spoken to men and women living in the world of the daily newspaper. The sermon then must deal, not only with what happened to Moses, but what is happening to Mrs. Jones, or the multi-national corporation.

"I think you will find," he said, "that over these years my sermons have not become less concerned with the Bible but rather more concerned with the morning newspaper. I no longer believe the Gospel can be preached, week after week, in fidelity to the Bible, without reference to the questions that are agitating us and are reflected in the daily media. I do not believe it is my duty to lay down the Christian answer to every controversial question. But I reject the distinction between Biblical preaching and activist preaching. A sermon, a church, a Christian whose faith flows from the Bible must be activist. This is to grow with the Gospel, not depart from it."³

That is the thing about this life, about these lives of ours. It is never too late to keep growing. To keep learning. Because there is always another choice waiting up ahead. As long as there is air to breathe, there will always be choices to make.

"Choose this day whom you will serve." May we be courageous enough to choose the way of Jesus.

³ From David H .C. Read's sermon, "Growing with the Gospel: Points at Which My Mind Has Changed," preached January 11, 1981 at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.