

12th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16B
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
an Church
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Luther-
an Church
Portland, Oregon
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Today's scriptures are all about making decisions and choices.

According to those who study personality and temperament, there are two kinds of people in the world-- people who like to make definite decisions, and people who prefer to keep their options open. It appears we're split 50-50 on this. Half of us are outcome-oriented: we feel a sense of urgency about making choices and we don't rest easy until a decision has been made and settled. What's for dinner? We don't dither, we just decide and get cooking.

The other half of us are process-oriented: we prefer to postpone choices, keep things fluid, gather as much data as possible, and even after a thing's decided we may keep on revisiting the decision in our minds. It can take us forever just to compose a grocery list.

Of course these two different types of people have the power to drive each other absolutely crazy, at home or at work. Whether it's buying a car or closing a business deal or choosing the next book to read at book group, people who crave closure often see the others as indecisive or wishy-washy or procrastinating. "Why can't they just make up their minds??" Those who prefer open-endedness can be frustrated by people they perceive as rigid or arbitrary or prone to snap judgments. "What's the rush? Let's wait and see what emerges..."

Whether you tend to be more decisive or more flexible, there are some decisions that are so momentous that they can be challenging for anyone. Among these are the religious and ethical decisions that influence our life of faith.

As you know, our Churchwide Assembly has made some historic decisions this week on matters of sexuality, blessing of same-gender unions, and allowing for gay clergy. I know from watching the proceedings online that these choices were not arrived at easily or hastily. All kinds of careful listening and preparation went into the process. The voting members actively sought out the Spirit's direction in worship and prayer. I was proud of our church for its civility and discernment. But I know for sure that those voting members will be plenty tired as they head home this afternoon. We need to pray for them and thank them for the hard work and faithful

work they've done on our behalf. Making momentous choices can take a lot out of you.

There are times when all of us are called to make momentous choices related to our faith, as scripture reminds us.

Today we have the story of Joshua standing before the people of Israel, calling them to decide where their loyalties lie. They have just taken possession of the Promised Land, and the tribes are getting ready to go their separate ways, each to their own areas to settle and build a new life. Joshua says to them, "Choose this day whom you will serve!" You can serve the Lord, or you can serve the pagan gods. Choose whomever you wish. "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

It wasn't a moment for dithering. It was a watershed time. A time to remember how the One God had brought them out of Egypt and delivered them from slavery and protected them. A time to commit themselves forever to that one God. Joshua called them to be strong in deciding, because their future depended on it.

Centuries later, Jesus called his followers to "choose this day" who they would serve. He challenged them to take up their cross and follow him, to devote everything to his costly way of life. But according to John's gospel, very few people took Jesus up on the challenge.

Today's reading says that many people were offended by this carpenter's son from Nazareth who claimed to speak for God. They were offended by the way he challenged them to "eat his flesh and drink his blood" – which meant, to share Holy Communion, to worship Christ openly, to let it be known publicly that they were breaking with the past to follow this new Messiah. When people did that, they could expect to be persecuted, cut off from family, friends, business networks. It meant leaving the old behind, and it was costly.

No wonder so many of Jesus' disciples "turned back." Our reading suggests Jesus was left with just twelve. And again Jesus put the decision before them: "Do you also want to go away?" Peter spoke up for everyone with a response so powerful it's become a part of many worship liturgies: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." There's no one else we would *choose* to follow, Jesus. And they followed to the cross.

Our situation may not seem so stark today, but this same essential choice is also set before us – to "choose this day" to let Jesus Christ be the foundation of our lives. It's the fundamental choice that underlies all our other choices. First we place our

trust in God, and then we do our best to match our daily actions to where our hearts lie.

Christian faith is not about trying to be so painstakingly perfect that we end up tying ourselves up in knots. The fundamental truth of our faith is that God loves us no matter what. Our life is hid with Christ. God forgives us with all the power of Christ's life-saving cross. No matter what our past has been, we can be assured that God wipes the slate clean and invites us to begin living again in a new way.

And as we live this new life, our choices do matter. It matters how we use our energies and abilities and influence. God calls us to do what builds life up instead of tearing life down. We make choices like this every day.

Some of us have come here this morning with major choices weighing on our minds and hearts. Certain seasons in life seem to be watershed times when we're called to make big decisions about jobs, or relationships, or health care, or others for whom we're responsible. We summon up all the spiritual resources we can muster. We pray, we talk it over with faithful friends, we seek God's direction to choose a path that flows out of our essential commitment to Jesus.

Some of us have come this morning for help in making daily choices that are also significant, including choices to say "no" to things that threaten wholeness. Peer pressure, consumerism, addiction, you name it. It takes a strength beyond our own strength to keep saying "no" to death-dealing temptations, and to keep saying "yes" to what gives life.

When we're talking about our decisions and choices for God, there's no such thing as a closed deal. We choose in favor of God's goodness not only once, but again and again, as our loyalties are tested and our faith relationship grows deeper. Daily we turn away from what is not-God and we turn again toward what is God. Daily we confess our sin, and in the freedom of forgiveness we open our hearts again to become who God would have us be.

The choices we make do shape our future. But our choices are never the whole story. It's never our choice that saves us – it is God's choice.

And that's a choice that was made long before any of ours. Before we had any say in the matter at all, God chose in favor of us. It's right here before us in our scripture from John. When those twelve disciples chose to stay with Jesus, Christ made it clear that it wasn't their choosing that put them right with God. At the heart of things, it was God who chose them. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." And again, Jesus said, "You did not choose me. I chose you."

Jesus reminds us — to our great relief and joy — that for all the ways we do choose for God, it is God who has chosen us first. It is God who has claimed us as God's beloved daughters and sons. It's God who has given us a place in God's family forever. And it is God who will be with us till the end.

This is incredibly good news. Because of course we do not always choose wisely. Our lives are filled with bad decisions we either regret or simply accept as part of being human. How wonderful to know that ultimate choice is not ours — it is God's. And God does choose — to make us God's own forever, to forgive us always, to take us back no matter what mistakes we make, to be our strength and confidence at all times. Our ultimate destination in life is decided. We have eternal life with God, because God has chosen for us.

There's no dithering there. Only God's bold, decisive love. A boldness that rubs off on our lives, so we can live in confidence and trust and hope. Not because we are so great, but because God is great, and God loves us greatly. Amen.