



If You Choose

TEXT
Joshua 24:1–15
Mark 1:40–45

January 14, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

“If you choose.” “If you choose, you can make me clean.” All three synoptic gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — all three of them tell this story of Jesus healing a leper.

Mark tells it early on, though. It’s one of the first things he wants us to know.

We’ve talked about this before, remember? It’s important to pay attention to where in the big picture of the entire gospel a story shows up. Mark puts this miracle story at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. First he and his disciples go to Capernaum, where he casts a demon out of a man in the synagogue. Soon after that, Jesus heals a woman with a fever.

After that, he travels through Galilee, where the leper in this morning’s reading 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” began to seek him out.

Here’s what I find fascinating about the progression of all this. 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 of them cautiously approach him.

But it’s not until he says, “I do choose; I choose to heal you” that people absolutely flock to him.

I never really noticed that before, but it makes all the sense in the world, doesn’t it? After all, who doesn’t want to be chosen?

When my brother was in third grade, all his friends were trying out for the baseball team. He’d never even talked about wanting to play baseball before, but the herd mentality is strong at that age. He went to practice every day that week, and he complained about practice every day that week. He hated the drills, and he hated the running, and he hated being out in the heat. So I stupidly thought he’d be glad he didn’t make the team.

He was not glad. He was brokenhearted. And I remember saying to him, at the wise old age of 12, ever the voice of practicality, “But why are you so upset? You HATE baseball!”

He looked at me silently for a moment, and then he said, in his small, third-grade 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 baseball.

He cared about being on the team. He wanted to belong. He wanted to be wanted. After all, who doesn’t want to be chosen?

The leper who approached Jesus — I wonder what he sounded like. Did his voice tremble? Or was his voice 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, outside and apart from the dwelling of any others.¹ Their entire existence is one of isolation.

So for the leper to stop Jesus and ask him to heal him — not only because he’s breaking the rules; he’s asking Jesus to break the rules too. He knows what Jesus can do; the only 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 quite a

bit of debate about this word. In the Greek, it's *splagchnizomai*. Some say its best understood as "moved with pity" or "moved with compassion." Others say it's more accurate to say "moved with anger." The most literal translation of that word is "moved deeply, all the way down in one's bowels." That's descriptive, isn't it? But I bet you know what that feels like. It's that gut feeling you get when you instinctively know something is right or something is wrong. It's the feeling you get when you recognize the significance of something.

When the leper approaches him, I suspect Jesus feels both compassion and anger — compassion for the man and anger for the circumstances that surround him. But I wonder if he also feels something more, something seeded even deeper than emotion.

Because remember, in addition to everything else he was, Jesus was a Jew. And I think that any good Jew, upon being asked to make a choice, would hear the proposition laid out in front of them — but they would also hear the words Diann/George/Charles/Frank read earlier, words that any good 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 still being fulfilled — and then he says, "Choose this day whom you will

serve." The Israelites were living in a time and place where there were countless other gods they could pledge their allegiance to, so he says, to remind them and encourage them: "God has always chosen you. So now the choice is yours."

I can't help but think that 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."

The more time I've spent with this story, the more I've started to wonder — does Jesus choose the leper? Or does Jesus choose God?

Now the end result is the same: The leper is healed. So maybe the difference is the very smallest of nuances. But I have come to believe that when the leper asks and Jesus responds, when he says, "I do choose," in that moment, before anything else, he is choosing God. He is making the choice to serve God, to 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.

Do you know the name Ruth Coker Burks? Let me tell you about her.

In 1984, Ruth Coker Burks was 25 years old, visiting a friend in the hospital. One day 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, and 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 the 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 coming. 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 then after his death, when his parents refused even to claim his ashes, she buried him in her family's cemetery plot.

Ruth Coker Burks became the go-to woman when it came to caring 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. 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."²

"If you choose, you can make me clean."

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

Splagchnizomai. It’s something beyond compassion or anger. It’s something stronger than emotion. It’s 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. The theologian 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 at each moment is progressing toward one state or the other.”

A few days ago, the president of the United States spoke disparagingly of countries in Africa and in the Caribbean. He referred to them with language that has no business being repeated in this pulpit, using words that make “trash heap” or “outhouse” or “cesspool” or “human waste” sound civilized and refined.

The White House deputy press secretary later explained:

“Certain Washington politicians choose to fight for foreign countries, but President Trump will always fight for the American people. Like other nations that have merit-based immigration, President Trump is fighting for permanent solutions that make our country stronger by welcoming those who can contribute to our society, grow our economy, and assimilate into our great nation.”³

So, here is the thing. And I hope you understand that I do not say any of this lightly — because I know there is always a variety of opinions in the room. It is never my intention to anger anyone, but it is always my intention to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And friends, while we can faithfully disagree on policy, we cannot faithfully disagree about the fundamental value of each person, nor can we sit silently by as it happens — because to choose God is to choose one another.

We see it in this morning’s scripture, and we see it throughout the entire gospel. Jesus looks at the lepers and the lost, the despised and the unlucky, the mocked and the maligned. He looks at them as the question comes: “If you choose ...” and he says, “I do choose.”

So let us be clear: To the people of Haiti, Jesus says, “I do choose. I choose you.” To the people of El Salvador, Jesus says, “I choose you.” To the people of every country in Africa, Jesus says, “I choose you.”

And if we fail to do the same, we are failing to follow the way of Jesus Christ in this world. If

we refuse to acknowledge any of God’s children, we are refusing to acknowledge God. If we turn our backs on the *imago dei*, the image of God, in anyone, we are turning our backs on God.

That is the truth of the gospel, and to deny or avoid this is to find ourselves standing not only on the wrong side of history, but on the wrong side of our faith — because if Christ himself has chosen someone, who are we to think we know better? That sort of thinking is nothing less than arrogant and sinful.

But here’s the other thing: If we refuse to acknowledge any of God’s children, we are refusing to acknowledge God. If we turn on backs on the *imago dei*, the image of God, in anyone, we are turning our backs on God. And if that is true for the people of Haiti and El Salvador and Africa, it is true for those who disparage the people of Haiti and El Salvador and Africa, too.

I will be the first to admit: I struggle mightily with this. How do we stand alongside those the world rejects without disparaging those who contribute to that very rejection?

I don’t have all the answers. But I believe it’s true: If we allow ourselves to write off someone because they have written off someone, well, we find ourselves part of the same cycle of violence and hate; and much like the proverbial hamster running on his wheel, we will find ourselves going nowhere ... fast. We will miss something of Christ because the scandalous truth of the gospel is that Christ shows up in everyone.

At the same time, it is also true that accepting someone's humanity does not mean uncritically accepting everything they say. There is still room and need to name words and actions that are inconsistent with the love and mercy and promise of God. The challenge is for us to do so in a manner that ensures we ourselves are not being inconsistent with the love and mercy and promise of God.

Because “[r]eturning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Those are the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and work we remember and celebrate this weekend. In this, as in so many other things, he is teaching us still today.

And so maybe there is some more good news for us: We can still learn. We can still learn to be better today than we were yesterday, and better tomorrow than we are today. We are faced with countless choices, every day, which means countless opportunities, every day, to choose wisely and courageously and faithfully.

May it be so.

¹Leviticus 13:45–46

²<https://www.arktimes.com/arkansas/ruth-coker-burks-the-cemetery-angel/Content?oid=3602959>, accessed January 13, 2018. The story of

Ruth Coker Burk was first shared with me by Rev. Taylor Lewis Guthrie Hartman in a paper presented to the By the Vine preaching group in May, 2016.

³<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/us/politics/trump-shithole-countries.html>, accessed January 12, 2018.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.