

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 ~ 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

You Always Have a Choice

6th Sunday after Epiphany ~ February 12, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to 2nd Lesson:

It takes practice for a baby to learn how to eat solid food. Our daughter Hannah sent us a little video recently of her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Zoey, (yes, our grandchild) standing by the highchair of her baby sister, Grace, who is just ten months old, feeding Grace a bite of food from a spoon. Zoey is giggling and squealing with delight at this project. You can see her pride, being so able and accomplished in the food eating department, compared to her infant sibling. Of course, the bite of food only goes half in Grace's mouth and half *on* her mouth. At which point Zoey jumps back and declares, "Gracie's all messy!" And then breaks into peals of laughter.

The Apostle Paul was not as amused as Zoey was, by the new church he had planted in Corinth to which he was writing the letter we are about to hear. We know he is writing to them after three to four years since his original visit, as recorded in Acts 18. Four years into their lives as a church body of Christ, and he busts out a metaphor calling them spiritual infants still not ready for solid food. After four years of practice! You will see: Paul is on a "tough love" rant here to his beloved community in Corinth.

The vertical growth of our children or grandchildren is easy to observe. We can enjoy marking and dating it on a wall with little hatch marks as they gain inches each year. However *spiritual* growth is not so obvious. It can be difficult to measure or to observe. Paul helps us out here. He names some troubling behaviors and attitudes that are stunting their spiritual growth. Behaviors and attitudes that we struggle with too as we seek to grow spiritually. And yes, they can mess us up, big time.

Let us partake in the sacred, letting this spoonful of God's word into our mouths to chew and digest and learn from as it is written in 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. *Read text.*

Sermon:

Who in this room is currently living with, has ever lived with a cat? Cats are amazing creatures, with a wide variety of personalities, endlessly endearing and at times, annoying. Kind of like humans... But there is one part of the cat code that seems to be universal across all felines of the indoor/outdoor variety. It must be in their cat DNA. I'm talking about what they do when you open the door to let them in or to go out. Unlike dogs who are bursting to run out through the door and go to whatever they are not, cats are different. Cats choose to "pause at the threshold." Of course, the more in a hurry you are, the longer they seem to linger in this annoying habit of pausing before entering or exiting through the door which you are holding for them.

The truth is, we can actually learn something from our cats: the power of pause. (And I don't mean "p-a-w-s" 😊), rather, the power of p-a-u-s-e, pause. The power of taking a breath,

a moment, especially when we are faced with a difficult choice. In our first lesson from Deuteronomy 30, the whole of Israel is standing at the gateway, the threshold to the Land of Promise, the land they have spent forty years in the wilderness to arrive at this point. In Deuteronomy, we come to this passage you heard Josette read, after a staggering 26 chapters of laws that Moses delivered to the people of Israel, to prepare them as they transition from life in the wilderness, to life settled in Canaan. At this point, Moses' time to die is near. As he hovers on the threshold between this life and the next, his final words culminate with this call to careful, mindful, decision making. He warns them that in this new life they cannot possibly anticipate, one thing they can be sure of, is that they will be faced with many choices.

It kind of reminds me of when our children became teenagers and get their drivers licenses. This giant leap toward more and more independence, we say to them as they leave for an evening out with friends, "Make good choices!" They are too young to realize the fuller consequences of bad and good decisions. We hope we have given them the tools they will need to choose God's way when push comes to shove. Jesus interpreted the entire Torah into two commands: Love God, love others. As Paul called the Corinthians out: jealousy and quarreling are good signs that we are shrinking, not growing spiritually. Nor is participating in a personality cult the way to accomplish God's purposes. It's not only teens who veer off course with these kinds of bad choices. We grown-ups do this too. We may be more subtle about it. But we can also do more damage when we forget to pause, like cats, at the threshold of a difficult situation or conversation and just barge through the door, barking our way into the land of reactivity and meltdown.

Our season of Epiphany that we are winding up today, began with a story, six weeks ago, about the three magi, or wiseman who faced a difficult decision. Upon discovering the Christ child, they had to choose they could return to Herod and report what they had learned. But they knew this would mean certain death of the child Jesus, while they lived. Or they could leave for home by another way, and not do as Herod had commanded, which was risky and put their lives in peril. Surely they took some time to make this difficult decision. Lucky for us, they made the hard choice to go home another way.

Like the choice the wise men had to make: God's way of love calls forth subversive acts requiring sacrifice and courage. The choice to follow God's way can be a very difficult one. Loving God and loving others calls us to step through doors that lead us away from the status quo, away from "the way we've always done it." Loving God and loving others calls us to keep growing spiritually throughout our lives. Not just until we reach our full physical stature. Building up our ability to resist evil and hate, quarreling and jealousy takes a life time. And we do this better together. I believe Those three magi likely helped one another to make their hard choice.

Fast forwarding to 1990 in Columbia, South Carolina, last Sunday, Zach Kayhart and Elliot Johnson told you the story of how the Souper Bowl Day of Caring got started by one church, led by one youth intern (not even an ordained pastor person) back in 1990, sharing the idea with 22 other churches, raising \$5,700, to feed the hungry in their local communities. Year by year the vision and

commitment of Spring Valley Presbyterian Church has collected over \$175 million dollars from faith communities across the country on Super Bowl Sunday.

As the Rev. Eugene Cho, President and CEO of Bread for the Worldⁱ wrote in a letter I received this week, "Tonight, millions of children in this country and around the world will go to bed with empty stomachs and trouble minds because they did not get enough to eat today. But their hunger is not inevitable. It is a choice. Not their choice. Ours." We can choose to speak up for hungry children. When we do, we are feeding our Lord, who told us in Matthew 25, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt 25:40)." As a Matthew 25 church, we are committed to eradicating systemic poverty. One bite of food at a time.

"We choose welcome." Surely you have seen this sign in our front yard. We chose to erect this sign about 4 years ago and you may have noticed, it slowly faded as it weathered our Wisconsin winters. We had to replace it a couple months ago, as our hearts and commitment to its message continues to deepen. This is a choice God calls us to make every day: to choose welcome, not fear. Especially to the refugees, immigrants, folks who seem like strangers to us. Again, we hear Jesus' voice, saying "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Pause, listen to Jesus' voice, before you make your next choice.

Just this past fall, our session made a risky choice to change our approach to teaching confirmation from the way we've always done it. We faced the truth behind the old joke about how a church can be sure to get rid of bats that take up residence in their belfry. All you have to do is confirm them! Facing the reality of how often our confirmands profess their faith, join the church, and it feels more like a graduation rather than a threshold into a life of being Christ's hands and feet. This new curriculum starts and ends completely differently. Come to our Forum to find out more today. The stoles with the hands on them that you helped with last week and this art part of this new approach.

Perhaps you are facing a difficult choice today. Take a breath and pause at this threshold, talk to friends also committed to following God's way. Beloved community, when we feel like we don't have a choice: that is not God's voice speaking to you. Even when push comes to shove, we can always choose to walk with God, sharing the light of God's love and compassion for all of God's beloved children. Your courage can be the magnetic force that draws others to it. We always have the choice to love God/love others/love ourselves. Thanks be to God.

ⁱBread for the World is a nonpartisan organization whose members include Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. The organization is also supported by 45 denominations and many theological perspectives.