

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 22, 2021

JOSHUA 24:1-2A, 14-18 | PSALM 34:15-22 | EPHESIANS 6:10-20 | JOHN 6:56-69

I want you to imagine a scenario in your head for a moment. It's been a long day for some reason, and you're just trying to unwind and relax. And right as you are about to kick your shoes off and turn on *The Bachelorette*, you remember that you don't have any cereal to have for breakfast in the morning. So you trudge over to the store to buy a box of cereal. You're going to be in and out right back on the couch, and it's going to take thirty seconds.

But what happens when you get into the cereal aisle? The choices. Do you want corn flakes? Bran flakes? Wheat flakes? Frosted flakes? Whatever millet is? Maybe you'll play it safe and just get Cheerios. Well, do you want any of the—this number is true—fourteen types of Cheerios currently manufactured? You were ready to relax, and now you've spent fifteen minutes trying to figure out whether you're better off with Grape Nuts or Grape Nut Flakes.

Sometimes life feels like an endless cereal aisle. One choice lined up after the next. Where do you want to go to church? Should you be wearing a mask? Which bill should you pay? Which dating app do you want to use? Should you take 95 or the Parkway? (Wrong answer.)

Milton Friedman said that choices were a sign of freedom. But sometimes the seemingly infinite number of choices we make every day can feel more like a burden than a gift. In psychologist Barry Schwarz's bestselling book entitled "The Paradox of Choice," he argues that our assumption that a maximum number of choices will lead to maximum happiness is mistaken. And that excessive options can actually create feelings of "regret, missed opportunities, raised expectations, and feelings of inadequacy."¹ The Grape Nuts are fine, but maybe you should have gone with the flakes. Our relationship with choice is, at best, complicated.

Today's Hebrew Bible and gospel readings are all about choices. That's the connection that brings these two seemingly unrelated readings together. In the reading from Joshua, it's very explicit. Joshua gathers the Israelites together and says, "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living." Joshua lays it out clearly. You can worship the God who brought your ancestors out of Egypt. Or you can worship the gods of the Amorites. You have a choice.

And in the gospel reading, we have a similar choice presented. While teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus says that he is the bread from heaven that gives us eternal life. John tells us that this is a "hard" teaching that offends people. And people start peeling off from Jesus. They start abandoning him. It's too much. And Jesus turns to the disciples and says, "Do you also wish to go away?" In other words, "Do you want to keep following me or do you want to take off?" You have a choice.

So already we can piece together a couple things. The first is explicit in both of these texts. Being a child of God or a follower of Jesus or whatever phrase you want to use, involves choices. It involves decisions. There's never a point at which you can just stop making decisions and check out. Joshua doesn't say that since the Israelites' ancestors worshipped the LORD, this generation doesn't need to make a decision. He says that your ancestors had a choice. And now you have a choice. And Jesus says something similar to the disciples. *Other people are choosing to follow someone else. Do you want to go with them or stay with me? It's up to you.*

And so it is with us. We have choices. To use the language from today's confession, we choose how we use creation's gifts. We choose how we aid the ill-treated. We choose how to confront evil. We choose how to share the good news of Christ with others. Through the lives of

¹ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less, Revised Edition* (Harper Collins, 2009), 5.

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our neighbors, we are confronted every day with a choice. Do we want to go somewhere else? Or do we want to stay where Jesus is?

The second thing we see in both of these texts is a little more subtle. We have the ability to make choices, but our ability to make the right choice is constrained. Sometimes we're not choosing between a good option and a bad option but between two good options or two bad options or two options that are somewhere in between or seven options that are various shades of gray. These readings remind us that we have choices, but they can feel simplistic because the correct choice is so obvious. Worship the gods of the Amorites or worship the LORD? Abandon Jesus or abide with Jesus? If only life were so easy.

But notice that even in these comically easy decisions, people still misjudge their own vision and commitment. The Israelites say that they will worship the LORD. And they do. Until it turns out that God is more interested in the welfare of the poor than the comfort of the wealthy. Simon Peter says that he'll choose to follow Jesus wherever goes. And he does. Until Jesus goes to the cross. God gives us the freedom to make choices, but our judgement and perception never reaches the fullness of wisdom. So if being in relationship with God is all about my choices, then it's probably not going to turn out too well. Maybe I should have gone with the flakes.

But notice something else in both of these texts. We make choices, but whenever we do, we are always responding first and foremost to God's choice. In that reading from Joshua, the people acclaim "the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight." God chose to bring our ancestors out of slavery in Egypt. God chose to be God *for us*. And the exact same thing happens in today's gospel reading. Jesus begins not with the disciple's choice but with God's choice. "The living Father sent me." God chooses to be God for us in Jesus.²

These stories are about our choices. But before they're about our choices, they're about God's choices. Joshua and John both tell us that God chooses us. God chooses to liberate us from oppression. God chooses to feed us along the way. And God chooses to accompany us into eternal life. And whenever you hear the words at font or at table, you should hear that as God's choice to be in relationship with you no matter what.

So do our choices matter? You bet. They matter. They have consequences. They can be the difference between life and death. But whenever we choose how to respond to God's calling on our lives, we are always living and discerning alongside God. There is no choice we can make that is going to change God's choice to be with us, to be for us, to be alongside us as we walk toward the kingdom of God together.

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² Karl Barth, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Fortress Press, 1991), 29.