

I was away this past week on the Honduras mission trip.

Did you miss me?

Thank you! And thank you for your prayers and support.

It was an amazing trip; I wish you could have been there.

SCREEN: Honduras photo

Here's a photo I took in Honduras.

We were in a village a few hours from the capital.

More than a thousand people lined up for hours just to see a doctor, have their vital signs checked or get medicine for their children.

Honduras is a country with crushing poverty.

The first time I went, in 2015, I arrived with the attitude of

"I have so much to give these poor people!"

By the time I left, I realized they'd given me ten times more.

SCREEN: blank red background

One of the greatest gifts I received was an appreciation of everything I take for granted.

Things like, clean running water, indoor plumbing, electricity, access to health care.

I also realized that so many things I think are important, really aren't.

Especially material things.

Meeting children with no shoes made me wonder, do I need 8 pairs?

Seeing people with one shirt made me realize, I probably don't need 6 coats.

Do I need a computer, an iPhone and an iPad?

1000 channels on my TV?

And please hear me, this is not an attempt to put anyone on a guilt trip...not at all.

But I found myself asking some really profound questions about the choices I make.

Does having so many choices make my life better?

Does it ever get in the way of serving God and others?

SCREEN: I Choose main screen

Today we're beginning a 4 week message series titled, *I Choose*.

This series will take us up to the start of Lent next month.

Now, I don't know about you, but I pride myself on being an independent, free-minded person.

But the reality is that all of us are products of the choices we make.

People can spend endless amounts of time agonizing over little things like what to wear, what to eat, what kind of car to drive, where to stay on vacation, and then gloss over the big choices in life.

Each week of this series we'll look at a fundamental choice we need to make so we can truly serve God and others.

Today we're being asked to choose *Purpose over Popularity*.

Purpose over Popularity.

Let's dive in.

SCREEN: blank red background

So in the scripture readings this month we will meet individuals who faced some life changing choices; who had to choose between what they wanted in life AND what God wanted for them. And we're starting off with one of my favorite figures from the bible, the prophet Jeremiah. Now, we've talked about prophets before.

They were God's messengers, his spokesmen.

Any time God's people got off track or lost sight of their faith, God sent prophets to call them back.

That was their mission; their purpose.

But to say prophets were unpopular is an understatement.

Jeremiah was called by God at a time of crisis and catastrophe for the nation of Judah.

They were a small country, being squeezed on all sides by massive empires.

The kings of Judah were often weak leaders who didn't trust in God and weren't always faithful.

King Josiah abandoned God's covenant and led the people in worshipping idols.

The Prophet Jeremiah could see that disaster and destruction were coming so he preached against the king and warned the people.

This made Jeremiah the most unpopular man in all of Judah.

The king had him arrested, imprisoned, beaten, starved and threatened with death.

The simplest choice would have been for Jeremiah to give in.

Just stop preaching, pull back, go along with the crowd.

Jeremiah would have had a comfortable, easy life.

Instead he chose *Purpose over Popularity*.

God's purpose for his life over the approval of others.

What kept Jeremiah strong in the face of all these challenges?

We heard the answer in our first reading.

When God called Jeremiah to be his spokesman, he told him what to expect.

God said this:

SCREEN: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...

a prophet to the nations I appointed you....

stand up and tell them all that I command you.

Be not crushed on their account,

for I have made you a fortified city,

a pillar of iron, a wall of brass....

they will fight against you but not prevail over you,

for I am with you to deliver you.

I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.

Notice God didn't make Jeremiah popular.

God didn't put an end to his pain and suffering.

What God gave Jeremiah was the assurance that his *UN-popularity* had a greater purpose, a divine purpose.

Jeremiah was doing God's will.

So by keeping his eyes on God, not listening to others and not looking at what others were doing,

Jeremiah remained strong, steadfast and faithful.

Let's turn to the Gospel.

Today's passage takes up where last week's reading left off.

If you were here you might remember that Jesus was in his hometown synagogue.

He stood up and read from the Book of Isaiah, saying God had sent him to bring good news to the poor.

And today, we heard the hometown crowd's reaction:

Who does Jesus think he is?

He's from here! He's one of us; no one special, how dare he say he's chosen by God!

Worse than that:

SCREEN: They were all filled with fury.

**They rose up, drove him out of the town,
and led him to the brow of the hill
on which their town had been built,
to hurl him down headlong.**

But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away.

-Lk 4: 29-30

Try to put yourself in Jesus' shoes (or sandals).

He was with folks he knew and grew up with---
neighbors, friends, extended family members---
they were so angry at him they wanted to kill him!

It had to be a devastating moment.

Must have given Jesus pause, had him asking...

"is this what my life will be like now?

Is this what serving God entails?

Won't anybody like me?"

Some would, but most would not.

What kept Jesus strong in the face of constant criticism and ridicule and rejection?

How did he remain true to his mission?

He didn't let others distract him and he kept his eyes on God.

SCREEN: Purpose over Popularity

Jesus chose *Purpose over Popularity*.

You and I are here today because we have been chosen by God.

It began for us on the day of our baptisms.

At that moment our purpose, our course in life was set.

Now, most of us were infants---our parents chose God for us.

As adults, we must now choose our purpose and mission every single day.

And let's be honest, it isn't easy.

At times it can feel like an uphill battle.

The culture we live in offers endless distractions,
things that can keep you from God's purpose.

Other people may be your distraction;
their comments, their criticism, their actions.

Constantly comparing yourself to others is one of
the biggest distractions any disciple faces.

So long as you're ruled by what others are doing or
what they think of you, you'll struggle with God's purpose for you.

See, the mission and purpose you've been given is to follow Christ;
to be his disciple and lead others to him.

And choosing God's purpose over popularity will result in push back.

Sometimes the push back will be subtle, other times really blatant.

But push back is par for the course for disciples of Jesus.

Jeremiah was pushed to the brink of death,

Jesus was literally pushed to the brink of a hill and nearly hurled over.

You can expect the same.

So why not just give in, go along with the crowd and sink into the culture around you?

SCREEN: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;

a prophet to the nations I appointed you...

and I am with you.

No matter what you or I do, we can't please everyone,
but we can please God.

And at the end of the day, who's blessing matters most...
other people's or God's?

Well that's an easy question to answer:

who can give you eternal life?

Who offers you mercy and love and salvation every day?

Who has appointed you and promises to always be with you?

Only God.

Only God.

What will keep you strong in your faith and committed to your purpose?

You need God at your side and you need others on your side.

SCREEN: I Choose main screen

In 3 weeks you will have the opportunity

to sign up for a Lenten Small group.

I know many of you did this last year.

These groups will consist of 6-12 adults who meet weekly in Lent.

Small group members pray together, discuss the series, and most importantly: support each other in faith.

For all the men of the parish, this weekend is your last chance to

sign up for our men's weekend, "Christ Renews His Parish",

which is next Saturday & Sunday here in our Faith Center.

Without the support of other like-minded disciples it is nearly impossible

to resist the pull of our culture and the temptation to choose popularity over purpose.

Jesus knew this.

It's why he formed a small group of 12 Apostles,

then established a faith support group called the Church.

When times get tough, as they do for all of us,

having others at our side;

others who 'have our back' make our sacrifices bearable and

help us stay strong and committed.

And we must never forget the power of prayer.

On the final weekend of this series, Feb. 23/24,

you'll be invited to approach the sanctuary at the end of Mass

to offer a prayer of commitment (or recommitment) to Christ.

This week, be aware of the choices you make each day.

Let us never forget: we are God's chosen ones,

called to bring the love of Christ to others. Amen. +