

God's Promise: Freedom

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

We are talking about freedom this week, and I have to mention some current news that does not feel so freeing.

I have been troubled this week by the division that we see within the Church, this time it is within the United Methodist Church denomination. The same kinds of issues have impacted quite a number of other denominations as well, including ours, the American Baptist Churches, so this isn't uniquely to the United Methodists.

At a Special Session of their General Conference, 800 delegates of the UMC considered various language in their Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality. Their "Book of Discipline" creates parameters for how they conduct themselves as people of faith and within the church. This includes rules that guide conduct and practice for clergy as well as members. It also provides consequences or punishment for those who break the rules.

This Special Session had them looking at their practice regarding same-sex marriage and the ordination of clergy identifying as LGBTQ.

A proposal was presented by a majority of their Bishops (people who hold a position of authority over geographic regions in the UMC). Their plan was called the "One Church Plan." The Bishops were interested in keeping unity in the denomination by honoring the diversity of biblical interpretation and practice regarding matters of human sexuality, which have come up routinely at their General Conference meetings for many years. They wanted to allow local congregations and regions to determine their own stance on the issue rather than following one universal denominational standard.

The delegates voted down this plan 438-384. That was a slim margin, only 52% who instead voted in favor of what they called the "Traditional Plan," which doubled down on the United Methodist's ban against same sex marriage and ordained LGBTQ clergy and stiffened the penalties for those who broke it.

It would seem that with a choice in front of them, the UMC chose a lack of unity and a lack of freedom.

The vote, held this past Wednesday, leaves in question whether the United Methodist Church Denomination will experience a fracture, with a number of congregations leaving.

Certainly this division is not such a strong witness to the world outside the Church, so I lament the fact that the church is so divided.

Freedom? Not so much. I think that the Church can do better.

Now, let's read the story for today from the book of Deuteronomy.

READ DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20

In this story, the Hebrew people who have been living in the wilderness for nearly 40 years are on the banks of the Jordan overlooking the Promised Land. This is the point of decision in the story — the choice they must make that will determine how their history moves forward. Everything hinges right here.

God gives them two choices.

Behind door #1 is worship of idols, something they had been prone to do from time to time in the wilderness. God describes this path as one full of adversity and living a cursed life akin to death.

Behind door #2 is a life of worshiping God and honoring God with how they live life. This option will provide them and their children a prosperous life filled with blessings.

It seems like a simple choice. After all, who would choose death over life. But is it really so clear?

What had the people wander in the past was the shiny thing right in front of them that distracted them from the path God offered to them:

What led them astray?

- The option to immediately please their own lust for power.
- The option of greed, to keep for themselves more than their share.
- The option to have things their own way by crafting God in their own image.

For the Hebrew people, it probably didn't feel like only two options, but hundreds of options, many of which were uniquely enticing that in and of themselves didn't seem so bad. But in reality they were each a choice to move one step closer to their demise.

The thing is that the assortment of options cloud our mind and heart from the choice to follow God and be free.

The choice is before us. Will we choose a life of freedom?

Let's take a minute and break down our understanding of freedom.

Do we really have freedom when we can choose between lots of options? Or is freedom found in simply choosing the option of life?

So often we talk about freedom in the many options before us that might be described as unlimited.

We experience this in a very large store like Meijer. When we walk in the doors we can choose one of many departments. Do we want groceries, clothes, automotive, sporting goods, electronics? Or do we want the pharmacy? Many Meijer stores also offer us other options like banking, a cafe to eat lunch, a place to get our hair cut, or a number of other services.

In this country, we celebrate the freedoms we have to choose whatever we want, whenever we want, and wherever we want. And if one option we desire is in the next store or next town, we have a car to get us there, or we can order it and have it delivered to our door.

We call this freedom.

Consider now, does having all of these options make us more happy and satisfied in life? Research shows that it doesn't.

Actually, when we have only a couple of options or even just one option available we are actually more satisfied and value it more highly than when we have many options.

My grandma who died at 100 years old about a decade ago taught me this. She shared with me about how she was given a doll as a gift when she was little. She loved to play with that doll and cherished it for years. She never thought about getting a better one, never considered upgrading to a newer model with different features. She didn't spend time comparing it with her friends whose dolls were nicer. It was her favorite toy and she was completely satisfied.

This was the nugget of wisdom and a key to her freedom: She had one option and she chose that one option.

People who are given lots of choices, often second guess what they chose, and question if a different option might have been better. All of the energy of that second guessing leaves them less satisfied with what they eventually choose.

You could say that the more options we have the less happy, more dissatisfied, and less free we are.

There is the famous “Jam Study.” This results of this study highlighted the debilitating impact of having lots of choices. They put up one of those sampling stands in the grocery store so people could try different kinds of jam. For half of the time they put out 24 different jams, and the other half they put out six. All people who came to the table were given a \$1 off coupon to buy any jam they wanted.

More people were drawn to the table with 24 jams, but interestingly ten times more people actually bought jam when they went to the table with only six jams.

They concluded that the more options presented to us, the more overwhelmed and indecisive we become.

Some of those who study choices recommend that we voluntarily limit our options, like limiting the number of websites we visit to research a new car we are looking to purchase.

We actually have less and less freedom as our options increase, so when we limit our options we

are actually increasing our freedom.

The story of the Hebrew people on the banks of the Jordan River presents us clearly not with hundreds of options, but really with one option.

We as well could sort out all the variety of options for our spiritual journey, and let the message to the Hebrews find us through time and remind us that in reality we only have two options.

May we choose God and freedom!