

John 6:56-69 and Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Choices. We are surrounded by choices, and hopefully we make good choices. Every morning you get to decide whether you want to lay in bed longer, or if you want to get up the moment you wake up. If you're working and you choose to ignore your alarm, you could make the bad choice of staying in bed and oversleeping which most likely will result in your being late for work. If you're retired you can choose to stay in bed as long as you like, unless, like me, staying in bed means feeling groggy and having body aches and pains when I do get out of bed. Or, if it's Sunday, am I getting up for church? Then the choice of breakfast, clothing, daily activities, and so on, until you choose what time to go to back to bed.

Then there's the choices we make about how we spend our money. Do I really need that new outfit, or do I just want it? Should I stop at the coffee shop, or can I get what I want at home? Do I turn the air conditioning on or leave it off to save money? And how much am I going to put into the collection plate at church?

Of course we can always choose what we want to do in our free time. Do I read a book, watch TV, go to the gym, sit and play games, or call a friend? Or do I go to the food bank and serve people?

We can most often choose what we listen to. The TV, radio, Pandora, Sirius. When I hear the word of God do I follow it, or just let it go in one ear and out the other? Rarely is Bob Dylan my listening choice, however, I found out he has some gospel songs, one of them being "You're Gonna Have to Serve Somebody". The chorus has the line: "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Joshua, in the reading from the book of Joshua, the first reading we heard today, gathered the Hebrew people together at Shechem to renew God's covenant with them. He reminded them of their history and how God had been with them. The Hebrew people were always picking up the gods of the foreign lands they lived in even though they knew God is the only God to be worshipped. Joshua confronted them, telling them before they entered the Promised Land that he and his house were going to worship the one true God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He invited them to do the same. In other words, it's your choice, are you going to follow God or not? You can't serve God if you're serving those gods the other nations are serving.

This is true even today. Who are we serving? I heard it said that your god is that to which you turn to first for help in moments of need. Do you look at your bank account? Do you phone a friend? Do you pray? Do you open the Bible?

The Hebrew people agreed with Joshua that they too would serve the Lord. Do any of you have a plaque with the verse, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" hanging in your house? I do. Over the dining room door. Every time I look at it I am reminded that I am not that different from the Hebrew people when they made their promise to follow God. They did. And then they didn't, other things got in the way, other gods enticed them. They didn't have a plaque to remind them. My plaque doesn't hang there as a challenge to others as the phrase was for Joshua, it hangs there to remind me that I have chosen to follow God. To listen to God's word, and to try to hear God's voice in every decision I make.

God's word continued to be with his people even when they did not follow God, however it seemed as though God had deserted them. Just as the Hebrew people had been oppressed in slavery and cried out to God who led them to the Promised Land,

God's people were under an oppressive Roman rule and cried out for the Messiah to bring them back to the time of King David. Just as with the Egyptian slavery God did not immediately respond to the people's cries for a Messiah. When the time was right, the Son of God was born to once again rescue the people from slavery. However the Son of God did not rescue them from slavery to another nation, but rescued them from slavery to sin, therefore giving them the promise of eternal life.

But some people didn't like the way Jesus described eternal life would be achieved. When you don't know the whole story and only hear Jesus say, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood," it doesn't sound appealing.

There are two interwoven ideas in the passage from John we heard today. First, Jesus as the bread is the word of God. We listen to the word of God, we study the word of God, we chose to follow the word of God. The second idea interwoven into this passage is that bread as Eucharist and the connection between Christ and bread. Jesus fed the crowds with bread and fish. They followed him because they were looking at him as a powerful man. They didn't understand the role of Messiah. Jesus told them there is more to feeding than bread. There is the Spirit who gives life.

Jesus' teachings were too difficult for many of the people to accept. Two groups rejected it. The Jewish leaders who had a very theological position to defend not only for the good of the Jewish people, but for their very own place and power in the community. They could not accept the drinking of blood because it was not kosher. The other group who could not accept Jesus' teaching were some who were disciples, not the inner circle of disciples, the twelve, but the disciples who followed and listened to Jesus. Some of those disciples rejected what Jesus said because he was not willing to conform to their idea of a Messiah. They found grace to be offensive.

Those disciples were trying to control by doing work – they couldn't accept that this is a free gift. And we sometimes have difficulty with this as well. We live in a transactional society... I'll give you this if you give me that. There is no free lunch. But grace, when we believe, is free. So often we want to be the ones who control our relationship with God, to make it a convenient relationship. I may have mentioned the mime skit I once saw. The character was getting ready to go out on the town for a good time. The second character had a sign with the name Jesus. Jesus was with the person as they were getting ready to leave. However, when the person started out the door and Jesus got up to follow, the person pushed him back, not allowing Jesus to go out the door with them. Are there times when we don't want to take Jesus with us? Yet God always goes with us, no matter where we go. God controls the relationship.

When Jesus spoke the truth about having eternal life through him, eating his flesh and drinking his blood, it was a turning point. Those who could not accept the difficulty of his words had to make a choice. Either you follow me completely or it's time to move on. Many chose to move on. When he asked his disciples if they wished to go away, Simon Peter, the disciple who often spoke quickly to represent the group, Peter said, "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Do you recognize Peter's words? (It's the introduction we sing before the gospel reading.) We make our choices, and one of them is to follow the teachings of Jesus. That's why we get up on Sundays and make it to church. That's why we attend Bible study. That's why we gather together in the presence of God. We have made a good choice. All glory be to God.