

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

Our lives are filled with moments that present definitive forks in the road. Should I go to college or take that job at my uncle's shop? Should I pop the question with this romantic partner or continue to look for a spouse? Is it time to relocate with the company or would I be wise to stay put? Would Mom be better off in assisted living or moving in with us? Will surgery make my back problems go away or will I be worse off?

Of course, every hour of our lives is full with decisions mostly made unconsciously. What distinguishes the rarer moments of decision is that we are aware of a certain finality in them. We recognize that we are at a turning point upon which the future will revolve. Some options will no longer be available to us after this decision is made. Once committed to this path, there is no turning back. Even if the marriage or the career is later re-evaluated, the consequences of having made this choice remain, and the life we left behind is changed as a result.

The life of faith has many such definitive moments. We mark them with sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders. As the old song goes, we have decided to follow Jesus, and there is no turning back. We renew that commitment in our every Eucharist, the celebration of

reconciliation, and the witness of courage in anointing our illness to Christ. Being for Christ also means standing against many of the ways and values of our culture. As the song also says, "The cross before me, the world behind me." No turning back!

Joshua gathers the nation together at the end of their years of wandering. The promised land awaits, as well as a new season of stability, prosperity, and hope. But one thing needs to be determined before the nation takes root on the soil: Who is their God? Whom will they serve?

It's no idle question; actually, it's an idol (I-D-O-L) question. Most ancient peoples worshipped the god of the land, and each god was considered attached to his or her particular patch of ground. The God of the Hebrews had caught up with them in a foreign land, Egypt. The powers of Egyptian religion and magic had been no match for this God, nor had the desolation of the desert years. But now as the people stood poised on the brink of a new world, full of Canaanite gods and well-established cults that worked just fine, should they bank on the God that had delivered them thus far, or would it be more practical to adopt the tried-and-true gods of Canaan?

The nation before Joshua was composed of sons and daughters of those who had once stood before Moses and

addressed a similar moment of decision: “I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.” It may seem like a false dichotomy: Who would choose death and the curse that goes with it? But we who live in the modern culture of death, as Pope John Paul II termed it, are in no position to scoff at the question. Many choose the way of death, and most of us suffer under the curse that emanates from it. Our children inherit a world in which gross inequality, violence, poverty, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, irresponsible genetic research, environmental negligence, and war are all givens. The love of money and power has replaced the love and respect for life. And as every generation learns to its sorrow, there is a point where there is no turning back.

When Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem, he is not innocent of the ramifications of that path. The Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and Luke in particular, ramp up the Passion predictions as the ministry moves relentlessly toward Jerusalem, the city that slays its prophets. But in the tradition of John, Jesus is in and out of Jerusalem since Chapter 2, and the crisis of decision comes early on, in Chapter 6, from which our Gospel readings have been taken since Sunday, July 25th, with the exception of last weekend. At that point, after the bread of life discourse, “many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer

accompanied” Jesus. The gospel proclamation had taken a turn for the extreme: It had become a life-or-death matter, a with-me-or-against-me proposition. A lot of people don’t care much for extremes in religion. They just want a concise set of moral rules to teach their children and enforce on adults—the sort that will permit them to continue in their present course more or less unimpeded. Who wants religious cataclysm and life-changing conversion? In the time of Jesus and in the present, many would say: Moderation in all things, including religious expectation!

So, folks walked out on Jesus wholesale when the going got tough, as they often do today. Jesus turns to the 12 apostles and invites them to consider this moment of decision for themselves. Peter answers for the rest: Where would we go, if we turned away from the source of life? We believe in you. The other way is darkness.

Note: Peter did not say, “We like the way things are going, we think you’re onto something.” He simply said, “To whom else would we go?” There’s a hint of resignation in this confession of faith. If we are honest, there is often a hint of resignation in our own. We go in the direction of the truth, but it’s not always the way of our preferences.

Ephesians, the church's guidebook, offers marriage as the model for how we might commit ourselves in the moment of decision. Anybody who's ever been married knows it's not all a basket of roses or a bowl of cherries. Beyond the romance and the harmonious family life lies an endless series of decisions to defer, to sacrifice, to hold your tongue, to remain faithful despite further options, to be patient, and to put love above all else. How the union of two willful human beings ever works out is a great mystery, as Paul, the writer of Ephesians, is quick to admit. Every hour of decision is composed of constellations of smaller choices that orient us to embrace the big ones. If we know whom it is we're following, namely Jesus, we'll know there's no place else to go.

