

## If you choose . . .

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Yr. B. February 15, 2009. (Text: Mark 1:40-45)

I expect that most of us who are privileged to be parents, and who lived through the teenage years with our progeny, can remember words such as these being uttered – or maybe shouted in anger – by an outraged adolescent just before she ran to her room and slammed the door: “*I can’t wait ‘til I’m out of this house and can do whatever I want!*” [SLAM!]

Maybe, at the time our dear child blasted us with her indignation, we recalled having said something a lot like it to our own parents. I know I did. When we’re fourteen or fifteen we think adults get to do whatever they want, whenever they want. There’s nobody to tell *them* that they have to be home by 11:00, or that they can’t go to the mall ‘til they’ve cleaned their rooms. Of course, there’s a certain sense in which that’s true. For example, nobody is going to make me get my sermon planned before Sunday morning. If I choose to, I can wait ‘til the moment when I’m supposed to get up here and preach, and then wing it. That might work out o.k. But, then, it also might not. It’s my choice: either prepare or don’t prepare.

This morning, in the final verses of the first chapter of Mark, we hear about Jesus – who has now left his home in Capernaum and gone on a preaching tour through the towns and villages of Galilee – being accosted by a leper who’s sure this carpenter-turned-prophet is a man with the power to cleanse his body of the skin disease that has made him an outcast, condemned to keep away from other people, and to call out a warning to anybody who might accidentally get too close to him, saying (about himself): “*Unclean! Unclean!*”

This lonely soul violates the rules and comes right up close to Jesus, groveling in the dust at his feet, and saying: “*If you choose, you can make me clean.*” — “If you CHOOSE...” — He’s saying, “I know it’s entirely up to you. If you’re willing to deal with the likes of me, you could make this leprosy go away. If you want to, you can change my life. You can take away my shame. You can make it so that I can enter the town, visit my family, and put my arms around my children again. It’s in your power, *if you choose to act.*” And Jesus, moved with pity, responds to his plea. He says, “*I do choose to. Be made clean!*” He reaches down and touches the leper, and the man’s diseased flesh is instantly healed.

There are many different lessons we could draw from this story of the cleansing of a defiled man, but what I will focus on today (because I choose to!) is the role that *choice* plays in our spiritual life.

I was brought up in a pretty strict conservative, Calvinist church. Did you ever know a twelve year-old who wrote his English term paper in seventh grade on predestination? I did that. O.K., I was a little weird for a 12 year-old, but the subject worried me a lot. I agonized about it. —Was our experience of having choices in life just an illusion? Was everything already determined by God? Were we like puppets manipulated from above by a string-pulling deity who determined every aspect of our existence, including our eternal destiny? If so, what was the point in being alive at all, or in imagining that our anguished choices mattered? I don’t think I’m the only kid who ever thought about stuff like that.

Those concerns stayed with me and ultimately led me to the Episcopal fold, where we believe that *freedom to choose* is a gift God has given to all of his children. In the Genesis creation story, where we’re told that Adam and Eve were made “in the image and likeness of God,” it’s the

freedom to choose which made them to be, in a sense, “like God.” God told the First Man and the First Woman not to eat the fruit of the tree in the center of the Garden, but it remained their choice. They could obey or disobey, eat or not eat. That story is the classic parable of our mortal existence, asking the question: *how will you use your freedom?*

Our choices matter. Sure, the circumstances of our upbringing and various forces in our culture and environment have a huge effect on the choices we make. They incline us to make *these* choices rather than *those*. For instance, people who grow up in America are more likely to be active in a church than people who grow up in Great Britain. Religious Americans are more likely to be either Christians or Jews, while religious Egyptians are almost certain to be Muslims. Culture *always* influences our choices. In some cases there may even be coercion, but we’re still making choices. Courage is a decision. So is cowardice.

Shallow-minded skeptics think they’ve scored big points on us when they say, “How can you believe in God when you see the rampant evil in this world?” These people don’t get the picture. No one could do what might be called *good* if that person did not have an equal option for doing what might be called evil. The role of choice is essential for there to be any moral order in the universe at all. Your choosing to feed the hungry, or provide shelter for the homeless, or even give the thirsty little kid from next door a drink of water if he knocks on your door on a hot afternoon could not be described as “good” in any sense, unless you *also* had the freedom to ignore the needs of others and let them shift for themselves. If people were like machines, they could do neither good nor evil, right nor wrong. The freedom to choose is what makes human behavior either moral or immoral. God is not pulling strings, not making us do this or that. We are not automatons. *We were created to make choices.*

The leper said to Jesus, “If you *choose*, you can make me clean.” Almost every day, you and I are faced with moral choices: to do something good, or to do something evil; to act, or to do nothing. Almost every day, we could imagine a voice is saying to us, “If you choose, you can \_\_\_\_\_.” (Fill in the blank.) We may not have the power to cure leprosy, but we *do* have power to choose to make a difference *for good* in the world around us —usually in small ways, but sometimes in big ways.

The ability to choose also entails the possibility of making mistakes. We can exercise our freedom of choice – intending only to do something worthwhile, something positive, something good – and later learn that what we did resulted in consequences quite different from the ones we had hoped for. —So, does that mean we should give up and remain inert because our well-intended actions might possibly turn out badly? ...Or might not achieve all the good we’d hoped? Of course not. We do the right as God gives us grace to perceive the right, and then we trust God for the outcome.

Choice plays a crucial part in the life of faith. You may have heard me say this before, and you will hear it from me again: FAITH ITSELF IS A CHOSEN PERSPECTIVE. Faith, as I understand it, is not a “zap” from above. We don’t say, “Yesterday I didn’t have faith, but I got ‘zapped’ today, and now I do.” Faith is not a “zap;” it’s a *choice*. The Christian faith is a decision to look at ourselves, God, the world around us, and other people from a particular angle – from the perspective proposed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or we could choose the point of view, the perspective, of godlessness, or meaninglessness. There are philosophers who say that human existence has no meaning. We could buy into that. We’re free to reject faith completely and choose to look at ourselves and other people if we were actors in a pointless play – characters in the theater of the absurd.

The life of faith is a life of *repeatedly* choosing to trust God. The choice has to be made again and again. The life of faith is a matter of putting ourselves in God's hands today and tomorrow and the day after, and choosing to behave in ways consistent with that chosen faith. Count on this: we're going to make mistakes. There are going to be times when – with all the best intentions – we'll decide to do something good only to see it turn out badly. But our faith tells us to trust God for the ultimate outcome and keep moving on. As Paul said: "*In all things God is at work for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purposes.*" Those who trust him will come to see that God is at work for good "in all things", even our mistakes.

So, the next time you hear a voice – either out loud, from the lips of a fellow human being, or whispered by the Holy Spirit in the ear of your heart – saying, "*If you choose, you can \_\_\_\_\_*" (do something to make a difference for good, for help, for hope ...or for God), please answer by saying: "I choose to. I will." And then trust God for all that comes afterwards.