

CHOICES, CHOICES...

A Stewardship Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Joshua 24:14-18

November 16, 2025

Mark 10:17-22

Choices, choices... every day we are confronted by so many choices! If we go to the grocery store, we are faced with a huge selection of food choices including multiple brands of the exact same food. If we go to a retail store, we are offered a plentiful array of products from which to choose. If we pick up our smartphone to shop online, not only do we have to decide where we want to shop, and the item category, but then we need to scroll through what can sometimes seem like an overwhelming number of options. If we want to go out to eat at a restaurant or pick up food from a restaurant, we must choose which area restaurant. If we simply want to relax at home and watch some TV, well those choices can also be overwhelming between the hundreds of channels and multiple streaming services. Sometimes, I think, "I want to watch a movie I have never seen," and so I go to Netflix. I start looking through the choices. There have been times when after 20-30 minutes of looking, I simply give up because there are just too many options and I can't decide.

Much of the world's population spends little time considering options, because for them there are few choices when it comes to their daily living. But our American society offers us an immense number of options every day. Of course, personal finances as well as the location of our home can also impact on our choices. But in general, most of us are among those who have many choices. It is a blessing, and yet, the greater our options, the more confusing and difficult it can be to make the right choices, faithful choices.

Joshua understood that the most dangerous time for people of faith is not when they are experiencing hardship, but when things get easier and choices become more plentiful. The people of Israel had gone through a harrowing period in their history. After slavery in Egypt, they had wandered in a desert wilderness for an entire generation. There were not a lot of choices in those days – the daily food selection was basically manna and quail. After they finally crossed the Jordan River, it took years of hardship and fighting before they won the land God promised to them. But at the time of today's Old Testament lesson, things were getting easier for them. They were enjoying the land that "flowed with milk and honey." All they needed and more was available to them.

But now that they had more options Joshua was concerned that the people of Israel would make bad choices, especially regarding their devotion to God. So, in a passionate plea, Joshua urges the people to choose who they will serve while firmly and passionately making clear his choice. **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).**

It's interesting as well as concerning that in a land like ours, a land of freedom and choices, that the church of Jesus Christ is declining. There are other parts of the world, countries in Africa and Asia where the people have significantly fewer choices and yet the church is thriving and growing. I wonder

what would happen if a tank was placed in front of this church door on Sunday mornings to keep people away. Might attendance increase? When choice is taken away, we tend to become impassioned, fiery. But faced with freedom and its choices, we can become distracted and even lethargic about our faith. Christianity, a faith that requires the commitment of our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, can become more like an occasional hobby at best. Christianity, a faith in which sacrifice is central can become more like a pat on the back.

Instead of integrating faith into the core of our being so that it impacts everything we say and do, we relegate it to the margins of our life where it impacts very little.

Once there was a wealthy, young man who came to Jesus. He had money and power; he had the kind of status and success that comes with human achievement. He was a man who had the luxury of many choices. This young man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him. He asked Jesus, "***What must I do to inherit eternal life?***" (Mark 10:17). This is an important question and yet it was rather odd question from one of wealth and status. Most people in that day associated such things with God's blessing. It's not an accurate biblical understanding, but because of it, many would have looked at that young man and been thinking, "Clearly God loves you and has blessed you, so why worry about eternal life when it appears to be a "slam dunk" for you!"

But the young man knew that something wasn't right in his life. Perhaps he felt restless and empty, like something was missing spiritually. Perhaps he was struggling with the meaning of life and needed some guidance. Or maybe he was an overachiever who was looking for a pat on the back and an A+ from Jesus whose popularity as a religious leader was on the rise at that time. After all, the passage tells us that the young man was a very good boy when it came to following the Ten Commandments. We don't exactly know the young man's motivation, but he is clearly searching for answers. But the answer he got was not at all what he was expecting. It was not the answer he wanted, and it did not make him feel better about his life.

He was stunned and perhaps we are all a bit stunned by Jesus' connecting of the question of eternal life to the issue of wealth. And yet, that's not unusual for Jesus. There is only one topic in the Gospels that Jesus talks about more than our human relationship with money and possessions and that is the Kingdom of God. One-sixth of everything Jesus preached about dealt with the topic of our human relationship to money and possessions. **For me to fall in line with Jesus' example, I would need to preach 8-9 money and possessions related sermons every year.** Being that this is my first and only time this year, I have clearly fallen very short of Jesus' example.

Let's face it, we are all a bit uncomfortable with the topic, and yet Jesus makes it clear that those of us who are hungry for a deep and meaningful relationship with God cannot avoid it. This story about a rich man and his wealth is meant to shock and unsettle us. It's meant to cause us to pause before we consider our own commitment of financial resources to God's work. But this story is much more than a story about money, it is also a story about God's demanding love. After the pious and practically perfect young man from our

story clarified his credentials and commitment to God's commandments, we are told that **Jesus looked at him and "loved him" (Mt 10:21).**

We need to understand, though, how Jesus loved him. He didn't love him with a big hug and the assurance that "everything was okay no matter what he chose to do." Jesus didn't promise him a place in heaven which was the assurance the young man most wanted. In this story, Jesus loves him by dousing his pride with cold, hard accountability. If the topic of money in this story is unsettling for you, it is equally unsettling to realize that Jesus' love is not always warm and reassuring. There are times when loving someone else with the love of Christ means being tough and demanding. It means challenging the "status quo" of our current life choices, choices that may not only lack faith but be irresponsible and even destructive.

This tough love stuff is hard and many of us don't do it very well because we prefer to think that Christian love means making others feel better, whether it contributes to their spiritual wholeness or not. But today, Jesus offers a more demanding but better way. Jesus tells the young man not what he wants to hear, but what he needs to hear. He looks at him and says, **"you lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21-22).** Jesus' love for the young man challenges him to wrestle with his own incompleteness; it is a push toward spiritual maturity. His love pushes him toward spiritual maturity while also giving the young man the freedom to choose whether he will follow him or not. And I believe Jesus continues to love that rich young man even as he sadly walked away from Jesus' challenge, because **"he had many possessions" (Mark 10:22).**

What we see in this story is the inevitable emptiness and sorrow that eats away at us when we allow other things to separate us from the love of God. The young man was invited by Jesus to move out of his carefully constructed world of security. He was encouraged to trust not in things, but in God. He was challenged to change his definition of true treasure. **The young man was challenged by Jesus to redefine his sense of identity from that of being a self-sufficient, self-made man to that of being a God-dependent, God-directed man.** But unfortunately, he just couldn't do it. The familiarity and security his stuff and status afforded him were too dear to his heart for him to choose otherwise. He was still a basically good man, and yet he chose not to follow Jesus. And as he made that choice, a deep sadness washed over him. He apparently had a sense that he was saying no to the only true assurance of joy and salvation that one can experience in this life.

Today, we are confronted by the reality of our choices as we decide what our financial commitment to the work of Christ in and through this church is going to look like next year. I am not asking you to go and sell everything, but I am asking you to seriously consider what sacrificial giving means for you. Consider this day what you need to do to move into a deeper experience of God's love and grace.

Our uncomfortable little gospel story this morning reminds us that accumulating and hanging on to things tends to distance us from God

and distract us away from following Jesus. But if we loosen our grip on those things and perhaps even let go, we might just open ourselves to God doing something new and exciting in our lives. The more we submit ourselves to the loving demands of God, the more we will leave behind the emptiness that is the result of living life on our own terms. Therefore, let us look deeply into our hearts today as we each wrestle with our own incompleteness, and as we consider what God's love and grace is calling us to be and to do in the year ahead. Following Jesus is about daily choices, but today, there is a financial choice that needs to be made. Yes, it is only one choice among many that Jesus followers are challenged to make, but it is an important one that directly impacts our ability as a church to be the body of Christ in this community.

But before we get to that point of financial commitment in our service, let us first pray for one another, for Christ's church, and for the world...