

## **Sermon - The Choices We Make**

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A few weeks ago, in a moment of insanity, I auditioned with and was accepted into the Opera SLO Chorus for its performances of Carmen in mid-October. This past June I had missed singing in the Gilbert & Sullivan opera, and the chorus music for Carmen is wonderful. So, I made a decision to join in. The rehearsals in September are on Friday and Sunday nights, which fits into my schedule, but as we get into October the three hour rehearsals are almost every night with up to nine hours on Saturdays. And as you know, I have a full time job. I am going to take some time off as we get to the dress rehearsals and performances, but I am going to be very, very busy for the next eight week. And this was my choice to try to juggle all of this.

Now, trying to juggle too much is not new for me, for I also did this as a parent, when my daughter was growing up. Being a single parent and having a full time corporate job was sometimes challenging. Summer breaks from school were a time of guilt for me, for I wanted to make sure that my daughter had an exciting summer. Inevitably there were weeks in the summer in which I was busy at work, and had to just leave my high school-aged daughter at home all day. There was nothing scheduled and she spent the time playing Assassins' Creed or Portal on the Xbox and watching videos on the computer.

I had this sense of guilt since I felt I should have something planned to keep Katie busy, but Katie loved the down time. After working so hard through the school year, she didn't have to juggle a bunch of things. Her choice was to rest and play on the Xbox. This is a choice that many have trouble making. Instead, we choose to keep peddling and juggling as fast as we can. To do otherwise would require choices that many aren't willing to make. Or, at least I have trouble making these choices.

Today, each of our Bible passages is about choices. The Bible has a lot to say about how we make choices in life.

The Book of Proverbs is from the ancient wisdom school of the Hebrew tradition, and today's reading from this book is quite obviously about wisdom. And, more specifically it is about using the wisdom of God to make choices. *"Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices."*

And, our reading from the letter of James is about choosing our words wisely. *"How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed*

*among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell."*

And did you notice how this passage from James began? *"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes."*

This passage seems to say that I had better choose very carefully what and how I teach, or I am going to be in trouble. This is what I do for you.

In our Gospel passage today Jesus also talks about choices. He talks about tough choices. He talks about visionary choices. He talks about choices that people will have to make that have eternal implications.

*"And [Jesus] said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? "*

Jesus talks about choices that have to be made to deny oneself, to take up the cross and to follow. These are all hard choices but then Jesus also says we must give up ourselves. Like the Buddhist tradition, followers of Jesus are called to make decisions that control and manage our egos and our sense of self.

Jesus was insisting that those who follow him were going to have to make choices about how they lead their lives. He was telling people that they were going to have to make choices about how they spend their time and energy. Even two thousand years ago, people were trying to have it all.

And, if we were to adjust our Gospel passage into the words of today's culture, we would hear Jesus talk about the choices we make about money and power. The choices we make to try to be in control all the time. The choices we make to try to have it all.

Juggle, juggle, juggle.

Today we juggle family, and job, and friends, and God.

We all make choices about where to spend our time, energy and talent, and these choices ultimately shape our life strategy.

In my life I have had to make choices about a corporate or a church career, about my time as a dad, about my efforts as a husband, and just to hanging with friends. I have a limited amount of time and energy. I must choose how much to devote to each, and in the end it seems like it's my job that gets the most time.

Here is a relevant excerpt from an interesting article by Harvard Business School professor, Clayton Christensen. He writes,

“When people who have a high need for achievement, and that includes many here in the Five Cities, when they have an extra half an hour of time or an extra ounce of energy, they unconsciously allocate it to activities that yield the most tangible accomplishments. And our careers provide the most concrete evidence that we're moving forward. You ship a product, finish a design, complete a presentation, close a sale, teach a class, publish a paper, get paid, get promoted. All of these make us feel like our lives are moving forward.”

“In contrast, investing time and energy in our relationship with our family, friends, communities or God typically doesn't offer that same immediate sense of achievement. Kids misbehave every day. It's really not until 20 years down the road that you can look up and say, “I raised a good son or a good daughter.” You can neglect your relationship with your spouse or God, on a day-to-day basis, and it doesn't seem as if things are deteriorating.” Many of us and many of our loved ones make choices that offer an immediate sense of achievement.

Now how do we keep from feeding an unconscious propensity to under invest in families and overinvest in careers – even though intimate and loving relationships with families, friends, and God are the most powerful and enduring source of meaning and happiness? How do we keep from doing this?

Since I spent so much time in the corporate world let me use a learning I have had from that experience. In the corporate world we would say that the way to make better choices is to have a clear vision, purpose or objective. We must clearly articulate our goals. And, I think this translates to our personal life as well. What is the vision you have of your own life's purpose?

And, as you think of that purpose, are your choices in life lined up with that purpose?

No matter if you are sixteen or eighty, all have a purpose in life. Whether you are in the midst of a career, raising kids, or been retired for a decade everyone has a purpose in life. The poet and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the

greatest accomplishment." So again, what is the vision you have of your own life's purpose and do your choices line up with that purpose?

Now, a purpose isn't going to help us make good choices in life if the purpose is flawed. Power and prestige appear to be the purpose of many in life, and they make life choices that reflect this. I've shared this before but the second most requested song at funerals is "My Way" by Frank Sinatra? For some, life's purpose and the guide to life's choices is to always demonstrate that they are in control and doing it their own way.

I am going to suggest to you today that there are some better life purposes, purposes that focus outside of self. Purposes that reflect the grandness of each human being. Purposes that recognize that we have a creator, redeemer and sanctifier.

I've spent some time reflecting on my own life purpose, and I think it is something like this. The purpose of my life is to respond to God's love in four ways, to love God back, to love other people, to love myself and to love the rest of non-human creation. And more specifically I want to see the beauty that is already around me and help others do the same. In my best moments, as I make choices in life between job, family and God, I can struggle to use this purpose as a compass to see if I am going in the right direction.

In our Gospel passage today, Jesus compels us to understand our own life purpose and to make choices to be true to that life purpose. Choices that are life giving. Choices that are of God. Choices that are eternal. My request to you today is to examine the choices you are making and see whether they match up with your own life purpose. And, share this message with a loved one. Don't just peddle or juggle faster. Make choices that reflect who you are.

In my life making beautiful opera music with a group of fifty other people may be a bit of short term insanity but it also fits with my life purpose and allows me to give glory to God through music. So, remember the holy purpose of your own labor. You are wonderfully made by a God who loves you, and you are worthy of a grand purpose in life. Live into that love of God and make choices that last for eternity.