



Choosing the Godly Way

Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15C, August 14, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18, Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56](#)

When you are shopping, have you noticed in the book sections how much fiction now exists with stories about individuals, groups and families dealing with World War II? In these stories, the protagonists generally have a major issue of conscience to deal with as they struggle to live in or escape occupied territory. Or perhaps they live in free areas during that war and have to deal with the challenges of refugees in their midst or partners being far away. In all the stories, our main character or characters have choices to make, paths to follow. The markedly different ideologies in that time put people in positions where they had to decide what the "right" looked like.

I have lived in Coeur d'Alene for over forty years. I remember the days of the Aryan Nations and all that happened to proudly birth the Human Rights Task Force in Kootenai County. Over the past few years and, particularly, the last few months, we have had to ponder how to respond to rising divisions in our time as well as a return of that ideology reminiscent of the old Aryan Nations.

An anonymous letter written to the Press complained about the signs and t-shirts saying "North Idaho Rejects Hate." The letter was troubling to many. The writer said these signs on businesses were offensive and political and should come down. Others disagreed and simply made their signs bigger! And so, some debate begins. What is the "Right?" How shall we choose it? How shall we express it? Or shall we go about our business and not make waves? How should we respond when confronted with debates of this sort?

As Christians, we ask, as expressed in our Collect this morning, what is the "godly life?" How do we live in a godly way? How do we make these and other choices in our lives? How shall we live as children of God?

Our lessons this morning remind us that it is not easy to live as God would have us live. We have enough proof from the Hebrew Scriptures that the Chosen People, the people of Israel, were constantly mired in bad choices. There are Cain and Abel and ANY of our stumbling but faithful heroes, and the tales of the bad Kings. We even have the stories of our great and still fallible kings: David and Solomon.

In the lesson from Isaiah, God has just about had it with Israel. Look, says God, I gave you this beautiful land, this vineyard, and you've not done what YOU promised. You have left it to fail and only produce wild grapes, of all things! Well, says God, even if you have been my beloved, since you don't really care about the vineyard, and desert it for other gods, I will "break down its walls and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste... and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns." The justice and righteousness you agreed to execute has not happened at all.

Our psalm re-emphasizes what God has said in Isaiah. The vineyard has been torn down. Israel is in deep, deep trouble because God has abandoned them. The people are very aware that God has turned away from them (even while wondering, cluelessly, WHY God has abandoned them.) Yet... even in abandonment, they continue to cry to their God for deliverance; for God to turn back towards them; for God to help them.

These are the pleas we all make in our times of exile from God; times when we feel like God is just not listening to us. The people of Israel have stories upon stories of exile from God: Egypt, the Book of Judges (over and over, if you have read that book!), the times of the bad kings, and the two exiles to Assyria and Babylon. And certainly, there are the exiles any of us feel when we are deep in a dark night of the soul or immobilized by the difficult challenges facing us in our lives. Even in the face of all that, still we cry, "Help." Help us, God, to go forward. Help us to choose. Help us to take the godly path with you.

The lesson from Hebrews lets us know that the godly path is not necessarily the easy path. Some of the examples given are not terribly encouraging and speak of some very difficult trials. And yet, we are asked by the writer of Hebrews to look to the "great cloud of witnesses" in the stories and face whatever race we have to run with perseverance, looking to Jesus as our guide.

Then... in the Gospel, we have to wonder "really???" We are to look to this fellow who says he has come "to bring fire to the earth... [not peace]... but division!" !!?? And then he tells us how divided everyone will be. That is, to say the least, just a bit scary and worrisome.

The point is that choosing the godly way will not always be the easiest way. Just look at how many interpretations of "the godly way" exist nowadays. There are so many versions of Christianity that it is mind-boggling. Add to that, the other two Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Islam, and we have even more variations.

Karen Armstrong, an expert in comparative religions, sat on many religious panels soon after 9/11 when people were trying to grapple with the extremist reactions in several faith traditions to the events of 2001. She said the extremism, not the faith traditions, was the problem dividing them all. At their base, the Abrahamic faith traditions and most others, like Buddhism and Hinduism, all had at their root: justice, compassion, and love.

To be sure, the prophet Micah has said something like that to us all in Micah 6:8. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Still, we need a bit more to help us face our choices in these times of division and challenge. What does all that look like?

I worked on the diocesan staff from 2003 – 2007 when Jim Waggoner was our bishop. During his episcopacy, our diocese was faced with challenges that involved the interpretation of our scriptures themselves. Some folks who were more literal in one of my congregations asked him whether he believed in the Bible? I recall he said in that quiet tone of his, "I believe in Jesus Christ. And everything I read in the Scriptures, I try to interpret through the lens of Jesus." Jesus said in the Gospel that he came to bring division. And yet we all know the great

commandments to love God and love our neighbor. Jesus reminded us over and over of the importance of them both to our lives.

Our lessons today remind us that love is not always so easy. Nor is it always so hard. Our call is to face the challenge of choosing Jesus' way. If we look at a choice through the lens of what we have learned about Jesus, what shall we choose? In the midst of all the divisions in our present world, which path shall we take? Will it be hard or easy?

Whichever path we choose, we are assured that Jesus walks beside us whenever we choose to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. These are our two greatest commandments from God. They are the answer that supports all of our choices.

AMEN.