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Pentecost 13

Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, there is a powerful idea in the world.

A powerful idea out there in the ether.

A powerful idea that has been expressed by various persons in various forms at various times.

And this idea of which I speak is the following.

“We are defined by the choices that we make.”

Now one person who stated this idea is the author Andy Andrews, who said it this way: “First we make a choice. Then our choices make us.”

Furthermore, the poet Robert Frost described the powerful influence choices have on our lives in his famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*, in which the poem ends with the line, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.”

And in the second book of the Harry Potter series entitle *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Albus Dumbledore at a point near the end of that story tells Harry Potter, “It is our choices...that show what we truly are, far are more than our abilities.”

And Shakespeare himself knew this truth.

In his play *Julius Ceasar*, the character Cassius says to Brutus, “Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars, but in ourselves.”

In other words, the choices we make define our future.

The choices we make define who we are, so says person after person since time immemorial.

And even in our Scripture readings for today, that sentiment, “we are the choices that we make,” seems also to ring true.

In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 30, Moses says to the Israelites, "Look, you have two choices before you. There is life and prosperity on the one hand, and death and adversity on the other."

And then Moses admonishes the Israelites, saying, "Choose life."

And in our Psalm today, the author speaks about the choice of two ways, "The way of the wicked. And the way of the righteous."

And the Psalmist says, "Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked."

In the reading from the Letter to Philemon, the apostle Paul puts a choice before Philemon, either to receive his slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ, or stand as a hypocrite in front of his fellow Christians who meet in his home for church.

And even our gospel reading from Luke is all about the choice of taking up one's cross and following Jesus wholeheartedly, or succumbing to the allures of other allegiances in the world.

So again, the scriptures would seem to say that it is our choices that define who we are. But I am not so sure this is true.

I am not so sure this is true, that our choices define us...

I am not so sure this is true when it comes to God.

If a human being decides to engage in criminal activity...

If a human being decides to break the law over and over again, such that that human being is arrested and incarcerated, we in society "label" that person as a felon, or as a convict.

And that "label" is very hard to remove once it has been stamped upon a person.

Or, think about a child, who makes a poor decision and is labelled as "bad."

And it becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the child is told they are bad, and so he or she believes he or she is bad, and so then continues to make bad decision after bad decision.

So, yes, in our world, there is a lot of truth to the idea that we are the decisions that we make.

Bad decision after bad decision can lead down a path that is not beneficial.

Just as good decision after good decision can lead to prosperity and success in life.

But God works differently. God sees us differently.

For in truth, in God's eyes we are NOT the sum total of the decisions that we make.

No, in God's eyes we are the sum total of the ONE decision that God makes...the one decision that God has already made...

...the one decision that God has made in his Son Jesus Christ, for each and every one of us.

PAUSE

Because when it comes down to it, none of us is innocent.

None of us is guilt free.

None of us makes good decision after good decision each and every day. Quite the contrary in fact.

Instead of choosing life, we more often than not choose the path of sin, the path of evil, the path that leads to death.

Maybe not willfully, maybe not intentionally, maybe not even knowingly.

But we choose to go along with the norm, we follow along like lemmings, because we think to ourselves, "What are we but one person in the whole system? What are we but one cog in the whole corrupt machinery of life that allows for injustice, pollution, racism, poverty, homelessness and any number of other evils to exist?"

"What are we but one little person? What possible difference could we make? And in truth, how can we live apart from society anyway? So, it is almost as if in life we have no choice, that we have to go along with the norm, for what can we do otherwise?"

And so the march of society goes on? And by default we are complicit in the brokenness, again maybe not willfully, or intentionally, or even knowingly.

PAUSE

Now, I once read somewhere that in the ancient world, only the sins that could be forgiven of people, were those sins that individuals had done INADVERTENTLY.

Let me say that again, only the sins that could be forgiven of people, were those sins that individuals had done inadvertently.

One would go to the priest and make sacrifices, and confess his or her sins, but it was the sins that an individual didn't realize they had committed, those alone could be forgiven.

But the sins that an individually willfully committed, those sins stayed with a person.

And those sins God did not forgive. It is a rather scary prospect, isn't it?

Because so far we have only been talking about the sins, the decisions we have no control over, the sins we are powerless against like those that come from living in an imperfect society.

But what of those sins we knowingly commit, what of those decisions we willfully carry out that go against God's will?

What of those decisions in which we blatantly disobey God?

Well, apparently, in the ancient world, there was not much hope for such a person.

In such a scenario, there wouldn't be much help for any of us, for who among us hasn't willfully, knowingly, and even blatantly disobey God's commands and has committed some, even innumerable, sins.

A pastor colleague of mine is wont to say on occasion, "You know, those who are incarcerated...those who have been convicted by the laws of our society and who now sit in prison... they are not so different from any one of us. It is just that their decisions caught up with them.

They got caught for doing something criminal. But really, are we so different? Are we so innocent? We just haven't been caught.

And yes, we might not commit outright murder, or outright steal something from someone else, or abuse someone sexually, but the propensity is in each of us, for do we not all feel anger, and desire what others have, and look at other people with lust."

Yes, we might say that there is a difference because some people choose to act, where we do not, and so we are okay.

We think as long as we don't choose to act, we are okay, right?

But then there is that passage in Matthew's gospel...where Jesus is giving a sermon on a mountain.

There is that passage in Matthew where Jesus says, "If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

For in essence, you have already murdered that other person.

"And if anyone looks at a woman with lust that one has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

And so we say to ourselves, "Oh, yea...I forgot about that passage."

Indeed, I think Jesus preaches this sermon to us, to remind us that we are NOT innocent, we don't get off scot-free, even if we don't choose to act on our emotions.

Because the choice has already been made in our hearts.

And it is those choices that make who we are.

PAUSE

Indeed, the Egyptians had this belief that at the end of life, a person's heart would be placed on one side of a scale.

And a feather would then be placed on the other side of the scale, and if the person's heart weighed lighter than the feather...

If the person's heart was free from a lifetime of sin and guilt, so as to weigh lighter than the feather, well then, that one would know paradise.

So again, even the ancient Egyptians understood that it is our decisions that define a person, and it is the heart that is the seat of our decisions.

So it is our heart that is weighed at our death.

And I don't know about you, but I for one am not partial to such a ritual. I am sure I would all but fail. Put my heart on the scale and kerplunk.

My heart would fall to the ground, probably launching the feather weigh up into the sky.

PAUSE

Now, Friends, all of this is by way of saying that none of us can claim to make one good decision after good decision after another.

Not one of us can claim to be righteous, which is a word that means to choose the right thing, the godly thing time and again.

To be righteous is to do what is right all the time. None of us fits that definition.

And so, thanks be to God, that even though the world might see us as the product of our choices.

Even though the world might say we are defined by the choices we make...

This is NOT how God sees us, for if it were, who among us could be saved?

No, to the contrary, God sees us through the lens of the decision he has made for us.

And that decision that God has made is the cross.

Just think about that for a moment. Think about that decision, God's decision for us.

We profess it every week in the creed, but do we really think about.

God in Jesus Christ CHOSE to be conceived by the Holy Spirit, and CHOSE to be born of the virgin Mary.

And God in Jesus Christ CHOSE to suffer under Pontius Pilate.

CHOSE to be crucified, to die for us, and to be buried.

There was a conscious choice on the part of God to do this.

To become like us and to die for us. This was a choice, a decision by God.

And we can't help but wonder, "Why would anyone chose to do that, let alone God?"

Why would anyone chose to do that except that God abundantly values us, abundantly loves us, and believes that we are more than the choices we make, because the choices we make are pretty poor, as we have seen.

God sees our intrinsic worth apart from how the world looks at us.

God sees our intrinsic worth apart from the choices we make.

God sees our intrinsic worth in the fact that God made us.

God made us at the dawn of creation, and God looked at us, and said, "It is good."

We are good, even before we start making any kind of decisions in life. We are good.

Everyone in God's eyes is good.

PAUSE

So our human decisions ultimately do NOT define who we are. NO! We are NOT somehow on the road toward goodness.

Instead, if we start from the premise that we are good, and hopefully, that would bear upon all our decisions.

You and I are GOOD and so we should do good.

And that person standing before us is good, too, and so yours and mine decisions should result in that person's benefit, that goodness might prosper between people.

And the world is good, all that God has made is good, and so the choices you and I make should bear fruit that is good for the world.

And so, it is not that we should tell others to "be good," because the fact is we are already good. Instead, we should tell others to "be true to who God has made us to be."

Be true to what God has made you to be.

Be God's good creation, and let us allow goodness and righteousness to prosper all around us. Thanks be to God. Amen.