

SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 2010
SERMON: "The Choice is Ours"
SCRIPTURE TEXT: Psalm 36: 1-10

Recently I had the interesting experience of viewing the Movie, *Invictus*, at my local theater. It's the recounting of the actions of Nelson Mandela, the elected president of South Africa, to bring the citizens of that country together through mutual pride in the nation's rugby team's participation in the World Cup. Mandela was elected president following his release from twenty-seven years of imprisonment at notorious Robben Island. In a sequence he tells the rugby team captain that the way he managed his hard labor and solitary confinement was to remember continually the William Henley poem, "Invictus," which after defining the threatening feelings of darkness and depression battering his confidence, ends with the words – "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." With the temptations to retaliate all around him, President Mandela chose the non-violent path to attempt reunification. In some ways he succeeded but in other ways, he subsequently failed in the utilization of his power.

In our text from the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 36, we discover an interesting observation on human behavior and the choices we make. (Read Psalm 36: 1-10) In the first four verses the psalmist describes how we as human beings can choose to play God, choose to be self-serving, deceitful to the extent of fooling ourselves, to be manipulative to maintain status and power. In so doing people cease to choose the good, getting caught up in their ideas and plans where they feel in control, "the masters of my fate, the captain of my soul." In so doing, one's hearing, seeing, speaking, writing and thinking are focused on self. In rejecting a better way, it becomes easy either subtly or openly to make evil choices.

In contrast to that way, the psalmist perceives a more profound reality (v. 5,6). His profession, praise, and prayer center on the experience of God's steadfast love. This perspective views life not as a reward to be earned but a gift to be received. God gives life and will provide for the life of the world and its people. This is the very heart of the Scriptures. It is a collaborative venture where life has meaning because God loves us and is "with us," as the Spirit enlightens our choices and transforms our actions. This truth is reiterated in the New Testament as revealed in the ministry of Jesus Christ whom the Apostle Paul declares "in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:17) We remember that God so loves the world, and we are called to do the same.

But life is experienced amid persistent opposition from the world system and we are constantly placed in positions where we must choose what we will be and do – be self-serving and a god to ourselves or partner in a loving Lord's intentions for all people and creation. The psalmist prays for the continuation of God's love and abundant provision in setting things right (v.10). The writer stresses the aspects of God's character which make this way possible: divine love is unlimited, (5a), God is ultimately dependable and faithful (5b), and God's righteousness is the will and ability "to set things right," i.e. real justice. To take refuge in God means to acknowledge dependence on the Lord, the opposite of the wicked in their self-sufficiency and self-centered ways (v.7,8). It is in God's light we see the light of reality as proclaimed by Jesus in John's Gospel – "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8: 12)

Now what are the implications for us who call ourselves Christians and followers of the way of the Lord? I think that first we must admit that we are capable of and do make choices both good and evil. Soren Kierkegaard, The Danish philosopher once said a prayer that went

like this: “Lord, I have to make a choice, and I’m afraid I may make the wrong one. But I have to make it anyway; and I can’t put it off. So I will make it, and trust you to forgive me if I do wrong. And Lord, I will trust you, too, to help make things right afterward. Amen.” The first and last word about our choices is this; nothing you or I do wrong can get God to love us less than he does when we do things right. Nothing need ever separate us from the love of God. After all is said and done, being right is not the most important thing in the world. Being forgiven is.

A second important factor is that we don’t have to make the choice in isolation. This God who unconditionally loves us desires our collaboration in bringing the divine kingdom into full reality. It means we share the faith of Jesus and that our lives, like his, can make a difference. Brian McLaren in his book *Everything Must Change* states, “Having faith in Jesus and sharing the faith of Jesus will lead us to make what an early disciple called “a living sacrifice.” We will give up the life we could have lived, the life we would have lived – pursuing pleasure, leisure, treasure, security, whatever. And instead, we will live a life dedicated to replacing the suicidal world view with a sacred ecosystem, a beautiful community, an insurgency of healing and peace, a creative global family, an unterror movement of faith, hope, and love.” A pipedream you say? God promises this will come to pass and wants our collaboration in the process.

Finally, perhaps a few examples from people who have lived such partnership in the kingdom way can be of encouragement to us in our faith journeys. There is Martin Luther King Jr. whose birth holiday we celebrate tomorrow. In his leadership in the struggle for civil and human rights he often felt alone, vulnerable, and ready to give up the fight. In his sermon, “Our God is Able,” he admits his fear and prays to God as follows: “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” He goes on to state, “At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I never before had experienced it. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm - -I know now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life - - let us remember that there is a great loving Power in the universe whose name is God, who is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better people. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.” As did his Savior, Martin worked tirelessly and non-violently to bring light, hope and a new chapter in God’s kingdom way.

The martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, took on both the governmental system and his own church hierarchy on behalf of the oppressed doing what he believed God would have him do. His words in 1977 ring just as true today: “It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world: a very spiritualistic word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word like that creates no problems, starts no conflicts. What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks a genuine church, is when the word, burning like the word of the prophets, proclaims to the people and denounces: proclaims God’s wonders to be believed and venerated, and denounces the sins of those who oppose God’s reign, so that they

may tear those sins out of their hearts, out of their societies, out of their laws – out of the structures that oppress, that imprison, that violate the rights of God and humanity. This is the hard service of the word. But God’s spirit goes with the prophet, with the preacher, for he is Christ, who keeps on proclaiming his reign to the people of all times.” (December 10, 1977)

Then there is Bishop Desmond Tutu, creator of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa which placed forgiveness above revenge and reconciliation above punishment. In his book, *Crying in the Wilderness*, he writes, “The Church of God has to be the salt and light of the world. We are the hope for the hopeless, through the power of God. We must transfigure a situation of hate and suspicion, of brokenness and separation, of fear and bitterness. We have no option. We are servants of the God who reigns and cares. He wants us to be the alternative society; where there is harshness and insensitivity, we must be compassionate and caring; where people are statistics, we must show they count as being of immense value to God; where there is grasping and selfishness, we must be a sharing community now. - - - We witness too, by being a community of reconciliation, a forgiving community of the forgiven. We need it in the world today, don’t we? But how can we say we offer the remedy to the world’s hatreds and divisions, if we ourselves as Christians are divided into different churches, if we are unforgiving, if we don’t greet or speak to certain people? People will be right to say “Physician heal thyself!” We must not only speak about forgiveness and reconciliation – we must act on these principles.”

Finally, the late preacher and prophet, William Sloane Coffin remembers and honors his work and ministry with Martin Luther King, Jr. as follows: “It was Martin’s message that it is not enough to suffer with the poor; we must confront the people and systems that cause poverty. It was Martin’s message that you cannot set the captive free if you are not willing to confront those who hold the keys. Without confrontation compassion becomes merely commiseration, fruitless and sentimental. Likewise King understood the difference between defiance and freedom. Confrontation to him did not mean the ruin and humiliation of opponents. Nonviolence to him represented conquest without humiliation of the conquered. Nonviolence to him represented an effort to give visibility not to our own poor power but to God’s everlasting love. “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the glory.” Nonviolence represented a chance for all parties to rise above their present condition.” (*Credo*, p. 43)

The psalmist and these witnesses challenge us in our faith journeys. Can we affirm God’s steadfast love for us experientially? Do we consider the Lord’s alternative way of love and justice for the creation in our decisions? If we are silent when we should speak out are we faithful? When we choose not to act justly for others do we deny God’s transforming power? When we refuse to follow Christ’s calling, whom do we betray? The psalmist professes faith in a loving and forgiving God who makes life’s choices transforming rather than self-serving. The very power of divine love and forgiveness makes possible collaboration and partnership in God’s present and continuing kingdom which is the world’s hope and promise. How do you and I want to play it? The choice is ours!

Amen