

## CHOICES

Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church  
12 Pentecost; John 6:56-69, Year B  
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Yesterday we celebrated Doris Gipson's life and many of you attended the service. As most of you knew, Doris loved St. Paul's and was an active member and friend in our community. The thing that struck me most profoundly about Doris was her love of St. Paul's. Shortly after coming here, she threw herself completely into the life and ministry of this congregation. This was her Christian home and it was a vital part of her life. She was also a vital member of our community. As she once said in a Sunday school class, "St. Paul's is a blessing to me." She definitely found a life in Christ here.

Obviously, Doris' sentiment and experience with organized religion are not uniformly felt by everyone. In fact, there is a growing culture in our society that actively shuns organized religion. This reality was recently catalogued in a series of essays in the *The None Zone*. This is the subtitle of a book that explores religious life in the Pacific Northwest. A line on the back cover explains the source of the subtitle: "When asked their religious identification, more people answer 'none' in the Pacific Northwest than in any other region of the United States."<sup>1</sup> One of the points made by the authors from the data collected is that "choice" looms large for those who checked something other than "none." Church affiliation is not a given or an expectation of tradition. One has to choose if one is to become affiliated with a religious community. "Choice" in this instance hinges primarily on the relevance of God and Christian communities.

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<sup>1</sup> *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest*, edited by Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, (Alta Mira Press, 2004).

This, however, is neither new nor unique to the Pacific Northwest. In the Book of Joshua, the tribes of Israel stand ready to finally possess the Promised Land. They have already conquered the indigenous tribes and religions. You'd think it would be time to let out a sigh of relief after the 40-year sojourn in wilderness and the battle through Canaan. But no, Joshua says, it's time to choose. In one of the more dramatic passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, Joshua challenged the Israelites and said, ". . . choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15).

Somehow it was easier to make such a choice in Joshua's day because there weren't as many "none zones" in Canaan at the time. However, Joshua still had to contend with the people's sense of God's relevance.

I believe that more than a few opt for "none" today based on that issue: the relevance of God or religious community to their lives. To be honest, the church has sometimes given ample justification to that choice. Folks go looking for spiritual guidance or a holy encounter, only to walk in on congregations involved in contentious disputes over petty issues. These could be a ridiculous as the choice of the carpet in the nave to who had to pay for the use of the parish hall. Some visit Christian communities in search of a place to belong only to hear endless debates on who doesn't belong. With neither scenario reflecting the love of Christ, no wonder people say, "I don't want a part of you or your God."

Then, there are those who once belonged to a Christian community but left disgruntled. This morning our focus is on those who previously chose to be a part of a Christian community. However, they suddenly felt they couldn't be a part of the community anymore and elected to leave. We see this in our Gospel lesson this morning.

Today's Gospel lesson from John is the last segment of the "Bread of Life" discourse in chapter 6. The time for decision making is at hand. The followers, here described as "disciples," include the inner circle of the twelve disciples, and those people from the Galilee region who witnessed and participated in the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus has just reminded them he is the bread from heaven and those who eat of this bread will live forever. Those not belonging to the inner circle find this teaching offensive and difficult to accept. This notion of eating flesh and drinking blood does not jibe with their Hebrew piety, and so in spite of all they have seen and heard, they desert Jesus in droves. Jesus, obviously disheartened, turns to his inner circle and asks them, ***"Do you also wish to go away?"*** (John 6:67). Peter, without hesitation says, ***"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** (John 6:68). When the opportunity to abandon the uncertain cause is presented, bungling, but faithful Peter, swears his allegiance, and agrees to stay with Jesus.

This notion of leaving the church has been a recurring theme since Jesus' time. That's because we religious folk can be a fickle lot. Some leave because they love Jesus but can't stand the church. Some leave because they don't care for the clergy. Some leave because they want a church of all saints, and discovered they were surrounded by sinners instead. Some left because they wanted a church of sinners and got bothered by all the saints. Some left because they charge the Episcopal Church does not have enough rules

for living and morality. They charge our “moral compass” is out of whack. While others left because the church is too rigid and has too many rules. Still others leave the church because of boredom or unanswered prayers.

In light of the foregoing scenarios, “none” can become an understandable choice. However, it brings us back to the question, “If we leave, to whom can we go?”

That was the place where Peter had to do some serious soul searching. In fact, he most likely had already considered this before his exchange with Jesus in our reading this morning. I’m certain he had concluded, along with the other eleven disciples, that following Jesus was a costly endeavor. Every where Jesus went he antagonized the religious authorities and the socially elite. His message of peace, love and support for the marginalized was counter-cultural. No, following Jesus was dangerous. Yet having considered his options, Peter came to the conclusion he expressed to Jesus, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Despite the cost of following Jesus, Peter discovered that Jesus offered more than the other options out there, things like hope, the promise of a better world, and unconditional love. No, it would not be the “none” box for Peter.

There was a period in my life when I had subconsciously checked the “none” box when it came to my faith. It brings to mind a conversation I had early one Sunday morning at the Sigma Chi Fraternity house in Tuscaloosa. On my way to the bathroom after a long night, I ran into my big brother, Bart Loftin, who was dressed in a coat and tie. I flippantly asked if he was going to “get religion.” Bart, an Episcopalian like myself, said, “Yes. Would you like to join me?” I responded, “No thanks. I gave up the church for Lent.” I’ll never forget Bart’s response. He said, “I don’t know about you, but I need the church. I hope one day you will change your mind.”

While Bart’s comment had little effect on me that morning, it later made sense and had its intended effect. As I grew older and became *not* as smart as I was when I was a junior in college, I realized like Peter and the other twelve disciples how much I really needed Jesus. After trying other alternatives, I concluded that for me there is only one choice. I need Christ and his Church. Much like Doris Gipson, my life was not complete without that relationship and the fellowship with my brothers and sisters in Christ. Like her and Bart, I needed Christ and how he is manifested in Christian community. These relationships give me peace, comfort, and hope and sustain me through both the good and difficult times.

So it was for Peter. “To whom can we go?” Peter opts for Jesus, in whom he finds words of eternal life. But let us also remember that the willful choices we make concerning faith and following Jesus are not always a “once-and-for-all” kind of decision. Peter chooses to say to Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life” *now*. And Peter later chooses to say to Jesus, “I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). But then, in a courtyard outside the place where Jesus is interrogated before his crucifixion, Peter chooses to deny that he knows Jesus. Peter denies him three times. In the courtyard, Peter discovered “to whom can we go” does have other options, certainly safer and easier ones. With each denial of Christ he checked the “none” box.

Following Jesus is a choice of the will, made again and again. The good news and grace of it all, however, is that even when our choices and wills betray us, God’s grace does not. Grace does not excuse our failings. Grace simply, yet profoundly allows us to get back in right relationship with Christ. This happened to Peter early one morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee following the resurrection. Jesus is cooking breakfast for him and the other disciples and asks Peter three times, “Peter, do you love me?” Peter’s previous denials are now relegated to the past forever as Peter rededicates himself to his Lord. So it can be for us. Even when we choose not to follow Jesus for time, like I did back in college when I chose “none,” he is always ready to receive us back into his arms of mercy and grace.

Lord, to whom can we go? As for me, I choose the Lord.

**AMEN**

