

Making Decisions

Sermon on the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

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[2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10](#)

[Psalm 48](#)

[2 Corinthians 12:2-10](#)

[Mark 6:1-13](#)

Monday night, Butch and I went with our daughter Jamie to meet with her college counselor. Jamie's just finished her junior year in high school. So you know what that means. We went on a whirlwind trip touring colleges with her in April. She's worked her tail off this past year with APs and extra curricular activities. And she just got the results of her most recent ACT exam. There is one school in particular that makes her heart sing. From the moment she set foot on the campus, she knew it was the place for her. So she's decided she's going to apply "Early Decision," meaning she'll send in her application early and if the university accepts her, she promises to attend the school. An early decision college application is a binding agreement.

But in the middle of our meeting with the college counselor, Jamie suddenly said, "Wait! What if I get in there, but then realize I should have gone somewhere else?" She had known, intellectually, that that was the deal, but it suddenly hit her in her gut. She was asking the question we all ask when faced with something big: how do I know I'm making the right decision? It made me think a lot this week about how we make decisions. As we celebrate our country's founding this weekend, how do we make decisions as Americans? And more importantly, as we gather together here this morning, how do we make decisions as Christians?

We're all probably making big decisions right now, or at least we know there are some big decisions we'll have to make eventually. In Jamie's case, it's deciding on a college. For others of us, it might be deciding when to retire or move or take a new job. Or, it might be a decision about our medical care or a personal relationship or a business deal. And sometimes the decisions aren't about us. We might be asked to make decisions on behalf of our children or spouses or parents. Whatever the situation, as Christians, how do we know what the right decision is?

At the heart of most big decision-making processes is a movement from something familiar and stable to something new or maybe uncomfortable. That shift

from what is known to something that is unknown is what we're seeing today in the story from Mark's gospel when Jesus returns to his hometown and is then rejected. Jesus goes home. Home to the place where for many years he had felt known and loved. But then the people in his hometown don't welcome him back. They don't like the man he's become. They can't transition from their vision of who he used to be to who he is now. He's changed and doesn't fit in any more. Life had happened to Jesus. His life, becoming more fully the Son of God.

Our lives happen, too. We are all moving through our lives trying to live into our fullest identity, the person we were meant to be: a unique perfect creation of God. But things change; people change; our surroundings change. Most of us don't like change. We usually want things to remain the same. We want what's familiar and comfortable. But Jesus seems to take change in stride. He is surprised by the people's unbelief in his hometown, but he simply chooses to move on. How does he do it? What's behind his seemingly easy ability to make a decision and head into new territory?

That's where the rest of today's Gospel story comes in. When sending out his disciples, Jesus gives three pieces of advice. First he says, travel lightly; don't go with any baggage. Don't get distracted or weighed down by possessions. Don't worry about food or clothes or money. I think what he's really saying is, don't pack your expectations; they weigh you down and hold you back. I know the biggest item I often pack in my baggage is what I call a "should shawl." You know that voice that wraps itself around you saying, "you really should do this." "A good daughter or son or spouse or friend should [fill in the blank]." No, Jesus says, travel lightly. Don't bring assumptions about how things should go.

Because the second thing he says is: when you arrive somewhere, stay there. Stay there. Enjoy this moment. Don't look back or forward. Focus on what you're there to do right here and right now, which is: love God, love your neighbor, and heal the world.

And lastly, Jesus tells his disciples, when you can't express that love in the place you're in, when you can't provide healing or create an environment for love and healing, then it's time to move on. That's how you know it's time to make a change. When you aren't spreading peace, when you aren't growing into a person who heals others, then it's time to make a change. And about that dust? Shake it off your feet; leave it behind. Don't dwell on the might-have-beens, the should-have-beens, the what-ifs. Let it go; leave it in the past where it belongs.

So as we face decisions, big and small, remember Jesus's advice to 1) travel lightly, 2) be fully present, focusing on loving and healing, and then 3) let it go. And although it's not in today's Gospel reading, Jesus would add one more thing, a fourth bit of advice. Pray. Jesus modeled this repeatedly and taught us how to do it. Prayer is central to making decisions. So I invite you to pray with me right now, using this prayer by Thomas Merton that I keep next to my desk at home to use when I'm faced with big decisions.

Let us pray.

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself.
And the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope that I have that desire
in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always.
Though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear,
for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me
to face my perils alone.¹

Amen.

¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 81.