

## CHOICES: III - HOW WILL YOU LIVE?

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Matthew 6:25-33

Colossians 3:12-17

Whenever I'm getting ready to do a wedding, I meet with the couple a number of times before the wedding. During one of those meetings, we plan the actual wedding ceremony, and of course, one of the things we do is pick the scripture or scriptures that will be read. Hands down, the number one scripture read at weddings is the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians - you know, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." And it goes on - "Love is patient and kind . . ." and ends with the very famous line, "So faith, hope, love abide - these three - but the greatest of these is love."

Almost everybody uses that. But a close second is this morning's epistle lesson - the passage from Colossians. It is a wonderful passage that talks about how we are called to live, and I think couples choose that because clearly, if they live as that passage describes, their marriage will be long and strong and blessed.

It talks about making the choice to live with compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness. In essence, it calls us to live as Jesus did - to always choose the better way - the loving, uplifting, joyful, thankful way. It is, indeed, a great lesson for couples to hear as they embark upon their marriage journey. But it is also a great lesson for all of us to hear as individuals seeking to live everyday as faithful Christians.

Everyday, you and I have a choice as to how we will live that day. Will we be people who face each day as an opportunity, who face each day with inner joy and peace, and outer actions that reflect that deep inner joy and peace? Or will we be people who are grouchy and grumpy and stingy and angry?

You think I'm exaggerating? Well, I would imagine that you have encountered those kind of people, haven't you? People who act like they roll out the wrong side of the bed everyday - people who complain about everything, who comment about everything, who never seem to be happy. They wouldn't know joy if it ran up and kissed them on the cheek - they are just determined to be down.

I read this week about a man like that. He was dragged to a worship service with his wife (he didn't want to go, but she made him), and it was a service

celebrating missionaries.. Well, the time came in the service for the people to give an offering for them, and the ushers got to his pew, and he scowled at them, put his hand up to refuse the offering plate, and looked away. The usher was a bit puzzled. He probably should have walked away, but he didn't. Instead, he leaned down and whispered to the man, "You know this is for missions, right?" "I know," the man spit back at him. "I don't believe in it." Well, that usher was sharp, because he put the offering plate in front of the man, and said, "Here, take some. It's for the heathen, anyway." (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com)

You get the idea. Some people are determined to be unhappy and unpleasant, but that is not how we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to live. And truth be told, how can we help but live with gratitude and an inner joy that comes through in our outer living? How can we help but live that way when we follow the One who lived His entire life like that?

Search the gospels and you will see on every page that Jesus lived life fully and faithfully, passionately and compassionately, with deep joy and a love for those around him. Too often we make the mistake of making Jesus far too serious, but one author, James Moore pointed out that "If Jesus had been somber and severe, children would not have loved him so. If Jesus had been sad and sullen, the crowds would not have run after him; they would have run away from him. If Jesus had been cynical and sorrowful, people would not have come to ask him about the keys to real living. No (Moore says), Jesus was not a killjoy. He was . . . the life of the party. He was radiant. His faith was joyful and confident - so much so that it was attractive, and people flocked to him because they wanted what he had." (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 83)

Oh, that the same could be said of us, His followers - that people want what we have, because they see it in our lives. Even in hard times, Jesus lived that way. Because you see, this kind of lifestyle that is described in Colossians is not some pie-in-the-sky, seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, lifestyle, rather it is rooted in infinite trust and faith in the God who loves us and who is always with us. Therefore, we can rejoice even when life is hard, and live a life that one author described as being marked by "inner serenity, inner stability, inner joy." (Ibid, p. 84).

A pastor tells the story of how he saw people living the way Colossians calls us to live in a way that he will never forget. He was on a preaching mission in Africa, in a very, very poor and destitute place. The people barely had clothes on their backs and no shoes on their feet. They lived in shacks and flies buzzed all over the place. It was extremely sad to see.

But when it came time for the offering during the worship service, he was astounded to watch all of the people there dance their offerings forward. They

literally got up out of their seats and danced up the aisle putting whatever they could in the offering basket. He was so touched he had tears in his eyes.

After the service, he approached one of the people and asked her, “Why do you dance and sing when you bring your offering forward?” And do you know what she said, “How could we not dance? We are so grateful to God for what he has done for us in sending Jesus Christ to save us, that we have to dance and sing our thanksgiving; and besides (she added), it says in the Bible, God loves a cheerful giver.” (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 33)

Isn’t that amazing? Do you feel like that when you make your offering? Like you can’t wait to give back to the God who has given so much to you?

Likewise, do you feel that way when you get up and face a new day? Like you can’t wait to live in such a way as to give glory to the God who has given so much to you? Do you think, before your feet even hit the ground, “This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it”? Surely, if we did that, we would live as Colossians calls us to live.

As I’ve said more than once, people are watching us. They know we go to church, they know we are Christian, and they watch to see how we live. What does it say to them if we then go around with solemn faces, critical remarks coming from our lips, or selfish or mean-spirited actions in our lives? What kind of God does that reflect?

Living fully, faithfully, joyfully, peacefully, as Jesus did, is contagious. People cannot help but be lifted up by that kind of lifestyle. It is contagious. Let me tell you about one young man, who had every reason in the world to get up every morning grumbling and growling about the bad hand he’s been dealt in life; but instead he chooses to live as Jesus lived.

His name is Jeff Hensen and he’s a member of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. His pastor is Adam Hamilton, who tells his story. Jeff has an eye disease, tumors on his eyes, that has rendered him legally blind. As Adam describes it, he can just about see the large E at the top of the chart in the eye doctor’s office.

Instead of moaning and groaning about his lot in life, Jeff began to create things in his own way - painting, baked goods - and he would sell those things to raise money for a charity called “The Tumor Foundation.” When Jeff started doing that, he was in his teens, and he raised over \$15,000 for that foundation. It was incredible.

Well, once, when he was undergoing chemotherapy to deal with the tumors,

the Make a Wish Foundation approached him and asked if he had a wish that could fulfill. He said he would like to see Elton John in concert.

As luck would have it, Elton John was coming to Kansas City to perform, so the Make a Wish people made it happen, and before the concert, Jeff and his parents were taken back stage, and he met Elton John. He gave Elton some of the notecards he had painted, and Elton was impressed, and then, just before Jeff and his parents were going to leave to go take their seats, Jeff reached into his pocket and gave Elton John a \$1000 check for his Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Elton was clearly touched, and he asked Jeff if he'd ever been to Dubai, to which Jeff replied "No," and Elton said that he would like to fly Jeff and his parents to Dubai for an upcoming concert. They were all thrilled, of course.

Well, not long after that, Jeff got a call from the people at The Tumor Foundation. They were thrilled to tell him that they had just received in the mail a \$5000 donation to the foundation made by Elton John in Jeff's honor.

You know, Jeff Henson could have sat in a corner and been bitter about the bad breaks he'd been given in life, instead he chose the Colossians way, the way of Jesus - and look how contagious it was, and continues to be to this day.

My friends, all of us choose everyday how we will live. As children of God, and disciples of Christ, the choice before us is clear - live with joy, live in peace, live with love, live with thanksgiving. Live with passion and compassion.

Why would we want to live otherwise? The great writer George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap, and being a force of nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com)

Oh, to be a force of nature for Christ, instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances! What a better way to live, to be a force of nature as Christ calls us to be! The world needs our joy, our kindness, our compassion, our love - and we need it too.

I've been interested to watch on Facebook, since the beginning of November, a number of people posting everyday, something for which they are thankful. It's really wonderful, and uplifting to them, and to those, like me, who read it. It makes me think immediately of the things for which I'm grateful. It is contagious!

Friends, I invite you to start each day thinking about the good that day will

hold, and the good you can do by living as Jesus lived - at home, at work, in school, in your conversations, your actions, your choices. I invite you even today, as you prepare to bring your financial pledge forward for 2013, to do it with joy, and gratitude, and peace. I'm not saying you have to dance it down the aisle as they did in that village in Africa, but I am inviting you to dance in your heart as you lay it down before the Lord. You can make your pledge grudgingly and warily, or you can make it joyfully, out of grateful thanksgiving for what God has done for you, and trust that it will be okay, you will have enough.

Let me finish with just one more quick story. During a service at a Presbyterian Church in Ohio, every person was given a balloon as they entered the sanctuary. They were instructed that, at some point in the service, when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts, they were to let their balloon go, and watch it fly up toward God. Throughout the service, balloons were constantly flying up over the sanctuary. But do you know, that, at the end of the service, fully 1/3 of the balloons had not been released? 1/3! (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com)

What were they waiting for? And if that's you, if you have not embraced the joy of Christian living, my invitation to you today is "let go of the balloon! Let go of the balloon!" Live as Christ lived. Live because you are loved more than you can possibly comprehend by God. Live because you are forgiven. Live because you have love to share with others who desperately need it. Let go of the balloon and live with joy! Choose joy! Choose passion! Choose gratitude! Live like you are loved beyond understanding, because you are!"

Choose, friends, choose! Let go of the balloon. Choose life!

Amen.