



“Jesus Raises the Bar”
Scripture – Luke 9:51-62
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 30, 2019

Life perpetually presents you with blessings and sorrows, choices and challenges, and how you respond charts the path of your life. The course and quality of your life depends on the day-to-day decisions you make. Sometimes those decisions are born out of habit and you do them unconsciously. Other times you are fully aware that the choice before you is significant and you weigh the alternatives carefully because you know your decision will have a crucial impact on your life and the lives of others.

When we ponder our past, we realize that the choices we made about the school to attend, the degree to pursue, the person to marry, the job to take, and the place to live all strongly influenced the direction of our lives. At the same time, there are some small decisions that seem insignificant which possess the potential to make all the difference in the world.

You are heading on vacation and you are nearing the entrance to the interstate when you realize you forgot your sunglasses. You are anxious to get on the road and tempted to just keep moving and pick up a cheap pair when you arrive at your destination, but instead, you decide to circle back home and retrieve them. With your sunglasses in hand, you head back out to the interstate and you’re only ten minutes behind where you would have been. Ten minutes ahead of you, a tractor trailer loses control and there is an eight car pile-up. Had you not gone back for your sunglasses, you could have been involved in a fatal crash. Sometimes a trivial decision can make the difference between life and death.

There are also decisions made by others and circumstances beyond our control that determine our fate. You may remember there were several stories about people who worked in the World Trade Center who were caught in traffic or did something different than their normal routine on the morning of 9/11 and they were not in their office when the planes struck the towers.

And of course, there were events prior to our lives that made the difference between us sitting here this morning and never having been born. My great grandfather was John Knox – not the Scottish Reformer John Knox depicted in the stained glass window in our balcony, but his descendant. My great grandfather, John Knox, was a colonel in the Confederate Army who became a prisoner of war and was held a few miles from here in Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island.

In the summer of 1864, “when the Confederates transferred several hundred prisoners from Andersonville, Georgia to Charleston, South Carolina, the Federals took this to mean the Rebels were placing the union prisoners in harm’s way because Charleston was a key target of the North. So the Union decided to retaliate by sending 600

prisoners from Fort Delaware to Morris Island in Charleston Harbor. The island was held by the North and under heavy shelling by the South. Union General John Foster ordered the Confederate prisoners be used as human shields. They were tied hand and foot, and placed in front of the Yankee cannons to dissuade the Confederates from shelling the island. However, it did not deter the Rebels; they continued the bombardment. For 45 days, the prisoners were totally exposed to cannon fire. Miraculously, not one of them was killed. After seven weeks, as General Sherman and the Union troops under his command neared Charleston, he ordered that these Confederate prisoners be moved to Fort Pulaski, outside of Savannah.”¹

The Confederate prisoners, including my great grandfather, were treated harshly and the following winter added to their misery. “At Fort Pulaski they were placed on starvation diets of rotted corn meal, and were denied warm clothing and firewood for their cold and damp quarters. Thirteen of the prisoners died and were buried outside the fort.”² But, the survival of nearly all of those prisoners from both the shelling and being starved was so remarkable, they became known as the Immortal 600.

After my great grandfather survived that ordeal he had a son, Earl Knox. Earl Knox had a daughter – my mother. It goes without saying that if my great grandfather had perished in the Civil War, I would not be standing here today.

Each of us possesses a precarious past. Had this or that ancestor died prematurely, we would not be here. If a decision had gone *this* way instead of *that* way, we might be somewhere else living a totally different existence. And going forward, the decisions we make chart the course of our lives, which begs the question: What are the guiding principles that shape the decisions you make?

In today’s reading, Jesus underscores the significance of our decisions. Prior to our passage, Jesus stood at a crossroads where he faced a life-altering choice. He could continue to teach and heal in the villages of Galilee or he could up the stakes by marching to Jerusalem and confronting the religious and political authorities. He believed this is what God was urging him to do, so he decided to begin the journey southward toward Jerusalem and along the way, he and his followers trekked through various villages.

Today’s passage is near the beginning of their journey. It notes that they are nearing a place they might stay for the night. However, it was not a Jewish village. It was inhabited by Samaritans. Jews and Samaritans were not on good terms and accused one another of corrupting their Abrahamic faith. Nevertheless, Jesus sends messengers ahead to inquire whether he and his followers can find food and lodging for the night. The messengers do some checking and quickly return. They report to Jesus and the others that they are not welcome. Two disciples, James and John are livid at the news and they allow their anger to dictate their reaction. They say, “Master, shall we call for a lightning bolt to blast them?” With their emotions in command, they forget everything Jesus has taught them and their guiding principles fly out the window. Has that ever happened to anyone here?

Dr. James Doty is a neurosurgeon at Stanford University. He is “on the cutting edge of knowledge about how the brain and the heart – understood both physically and metaphorically – talk to each other...He says that as a species, we evolved to care and nurture, initially our nuclear family and eventually with those in our hunter-gatherer tribe. However, evolution also gave us a fight or flight mentality when it comes to other tribes. That is why we can be very much at home with people who look like we do and think like we do, but we are wary of people who are different. This is the danger of tribalism and it is played out all over the globe as people view those unlike themselves as the enemy.”³

James and John view the other tribe – the Samaritans – as the enemy. And to up the ante, since they are tight with Jesus, they believe they are right with God. Therefore, those who oppose them must be God’s enemies, too. In their minds, that justifies their destruction.

Michael Jenkins, recently retired president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, wrote, “Perhaps there is nothing quite as seductive as the idea that God is on our side and that our enemies are God’s enemies. It is highly desirable to hope that we are on *God’s* side, but it is inherently risky to believe that God is on *our* side. (If we hope to be on God’s side), we will aspire to conform our hopes and actions to the ways of God, (but if we believe God is on our side) we will try to make God over in our own small image. (Striving to be on God’s side will inspire us to emulate) the goodness, mercy, justice and grace of God. (Believing God is on our side will lead) to arrogance, (harsh judgments), and self-deception.”⁴

When people are unkind to us - when they are disrespectful or insulting –it is tempting to strike back, especially if we perceive that they are from another tribe. After James and John feel they have not been treated properly, they beg for permission to incinerate the Samaritans.

Jesus chastises them for allowing their anger to erupt into a yearning for retaliation. Instead of fuming at being rebuffed, Jesus simply directs his entourage to move on to the next village.

It is so important to be awake each day to what is happening inside of us because it often determines how we will react to a person or a situation we encounter. This is where prayer can be so powerful. It can help us identify the vile stirrings within us that can come out in cruel and harmful ways. Prayer can help us reorient ourselves from darkness to light.

Returning to our passage, we learn that while Jesus and his disciples continue their journey, three would-be followers approach Jesus and express their desire to join his ranks. But rather than gladly embracing them and easing them into his entourage, Jesus warns them that becoming one of his followers is demanding. It requires determination and commitment and discipline.

The first one says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replies, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words, are you ready to risk your security? Are you ready to step into an unknown future?

A second potential follower is ready to commit to Jesus, but says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” It is a reasonable request, but the response of Jesus is shocking: “Let the dead bury their own dead; as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The duty on burying the dead was binding on all Jews. “Honor your father and mother” was one of the big ten. Was Jesus demanding that this man reject this time-honored responsibility?

As is often his style, Jesus uses hyperbole to drive home his message. He is saying, “Do not miss what is most important. Make God first in your life.”

A third follower approaches Jesus saying, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me say farewell to those at my home.”

Jesus replies, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Again, Jesus exaggerates to deliver a striking message. Once you commit to following Jesus, do not keep glancing over your shoulder. If you put too much stock in lesser commitments, you will veer off course.

God wants our lives to be an adventure, but for that to happen, we must be all in. God wants us to commit our intelligence, our energy, and our resources to following Jesus.

Twenty-five members of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation toured Georgia speaking about their tragedies. All had lost a loved one to murder. And all had taken the long journey of grief from disbelief to outrage to forgiveness. They had discovered that extending compassion to others helps heal their own wounds.

One evening George White was sharing his struggle to overcome the hatred that had poisoned his life for years after the murder of his wife. While he was talking, someone in the crowd shouted, "A man kills your wife, and you forgive that man? How is that possible?" The voice was that of a 16-year-old Bosnian who had recently arrived as a refugee from her war-torn land. She doubted she would ever be able to forgive the Serbs.

Mr. White walked over to her and gently placed his hands on her shoulders and said, "Honey, you have to try. It's the only way to find healing from all this rotten mess."

From two very different situations, half a world apart, two hearts met and beat together the truth.⁵ It is the truth of Jesus. Even though you may feel like hating – love. Even though you may feel like retaliating – forgive.

Life presents each of us with blessings and sorrows, choices and challenges, and how we respond charts the path of our life. I hope and pray our responses will be in harmony with the way of Jesus.

NOTES

1. *The Immortal Six Hundred 1911 Edition with William Epps Notes and News Article.*
2. *Immortal 600*, National Parks Service, www.nps.gov/fopu/learn/news/immortal-600-living-history-event.htm, February 17, 2007.
3. Krista Tippett, "The Magic Shop of the Brain," *OnBeing.org*, November 8, 2018.
4. Michael Jenkins, "God is with Us – Bonhoeffer's Germany," *Thinking Out Loud*, May 3, 2016.
5. Joyce Hollyday, *Sojo.net*