

Sermon – Stewardship Sunday 2014
Joshua

It was September 26, 1983, and 44-year-old Lt. Col. Stanislav Petrov was at his post in a secret bunker near Moscow. His job was to monitor the Soviet Union's early-warning satellite system. Just after midnight, one of the satellites gave off the alert that the US had launched five ballistic missiles at Russia, and it was Lt. Col. Petrov's duty to determine a response. He had to discern – was this warning for real or a false alarm? The choice he would make in the next minute was critical. If he ignored the alarm, he might risk an attack on the country he was called to serve. If he acted upon the alarm, and it was false, he risked setting in motion World War III. As we sit here today, it is obvious how the story ended. Petrov discerned and advised the others that the alert was a false alarm. His split-second choice never earned him a medal, but his swift decision-making has earned him a place as an unsung hero of modern history.¹

While not all of our choices are as dramatic as Petrov's that September day, we know that **choices are important**. Some choices save lives. Some set the course for the future. Some choices reflect who we are. Whether we are seeking to choose our spouse or the paint color for our living room, choices impact our daily lives. Choices make a difference.

Our Biblical text for today places a heavy emphasis on choice. We pick up our text toward the end of the story of Israel's journey into Canaan. Joshua has brought the Israelites

into the Promised Land. They have completed their conquest of Canaan, and are settling in to their new home. And so Joshua calls together the Israelites at Shechem – all of the leadership from the twelve tribes - that they might look backwards and look forward together.

Joshua points out to the Israelites all that God has done for their ancestors and for them. **He tells them the story again – the story of who they are and of what God has done.** He reminds them that they are a people formed by God's own hand. He tells them that they are a people freed by God's own saving. He tells them that they are a people sustained in the wilderness, brought through battle, and given a home by God's own care. He reminds the Israelites, lest they grow arrogant in their accomplishment or complacent in their newfound security, that *everything* they have and *everything* they are has come from God.

And then he issues an invitation. **“Choose today who you will serve.”** Choose between the idols of your ancestors and the One True God. Choose between superstitions of the day and the power of the Living God. Choose between service to your own ambition and service to the God who has made you who you are.

And, in the midst of his invitation, Joshua declares that **he** and his household – well, they will serve the LORD.

Joshua's message to the Israelites resonates with us today too – **for choice is, in many ways, at the heart of who we are.**

We live in an age and in a country in which both our economic and governmental systems are fueled by choice.

Making choices is in our blood. We know how to make decisions in a climate where any option is ours for the

¹ <http://twistedstifter.com/2013/12/10-people-who-made-the-world-a-better-place/>

taking. We select TV programs from a list of hundreds of cable stations. And if we don't like what we find there – well, there's always On Demand or Netflix. We know how to articulate our distinctive Starbucks order – using the right vocabulary so that the barista can accurately and efficiently mark our choice of drink, size, milk, and flavoring on the side of the cup before signing our name right beneath the lid. **But Joshua invites us to ask a deeper question: *what do our choices say about us?***

In a TED talk entitled “The Art of Choosing” Sheena Iyengar shares an anecdote from a study she and a colleague conducted in Japantown, San Francisco. In this study, Anglo-American and first generation Asian-American children were invited to do anagram puzzles, and to write their answers with a marker. **Group One** was welcomed into the room by Miss Smith, and invited to choose their own pile of anagrams, and to select their own color marker. The **second group** of children was shown the same anagrams and the same markers, but **Miss Smith** selected the pile of anagrams and the marker. The **third group**, when greeted by Miss Smith, was told that their Mother had selected their anagrams and their markers for them.

The results were intriguing. Iyengar reported that the Anglo-American children completed twice as many anagrams when given the choice to decide which ones to complete was left up to the children themselves. The Asian-American children, however, performed at their highest when they believed their mother had made the choice for them.

Iyengar has noticed that, across different cultures, choice is often perceived differently. For one group, choice is prized as an **opportunity to assert one's individuality** – to set

oneself apart from the crowd, to earn distinction. For the other group, **choice was valued as a tool to create harmony and build community.**²

Our choices say a lot about us. They reflect our attitudes and beliefs. Our choices tell a story about what's important to us and who we love – what and who we stand for; what and who we are made of.

Joshua knew this well. He had seen the Israelites make choices that reflected that their hearts had turned from God. He had seen the Israelites make choices of great faith, and others that marked a belief in their own insecurity and in their own power. He had seen the Israelites make choices that have affirmed God's goodness and shunned God's power. He knew that choices impacted relationships and had ripple effects that could impact generations.

And so he invited the Israelites to make a decisive choice – a choice that would orient their whole life together. This choice, if upheld, would help to guide the Israelites through moments of conflict or confusion. It would unite them. It would be a gift for their future. He invited them to choose to serve the God who had first loved them.

How would *we* answer Joshua's question to us? What or whom do WE choose to serve?

When we think about service as an expenditure of energy and effort – and time and money – most of us would be honest to say that **we serve more than one thing:** we serve our families and our employers. We serve our community and

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http://www.ted.com/talks/sheena_iyengar_on_the_art_of_choosing/transcript?language=en#t-374000

world. We even serve ourselves – our appetites and our aspirations. We sometimes serve the expectations and needs of others. And rightly so. We are called to give of ourselves in many ways. We have many responsibilities that command our energy and effort

But what about God? See, Joshua recognizes that God’s grace is at the heart of all that we have and all that we do. His invitation, then, is to place service to God at the center of our lives. **He calls us to prioritize service to God above all else – and to orient the whole of our lives as a grateful response to God’s grace all around.** When we serve our family, when we serve our community, when we service our own needs – all of these efforts are to be done as an act of worship to God. **With God as our focus all of our service would be done in a posture of love, compassion, reconciliation and care.** We would take good care of all that we have been given and all that we are, recognizing that every blessing is a precious gift from the God who first loved us.

It is fitting that this text is our lectionary reading on the same day we celebrate Stewardship Sunday as a church. Joshua’s message invites us into an appropriate posture for stewardship: that is, a posture of **gratitude and response**. He asks **US** today to open our eyes and notice God’s blessings. He is even willing to help us recount them. Then he asks us to **respond – to put our gratitude into action.**

It is fitting that our theme for the Stewardship Campaign is “Opportunity.” As I have reflected about Stewardship this year, the word opportunity has resonated with me. In my own life **ELPC has been a community that has helped me discern opportunities for God’s service.**

An opportunity to worship with a high school friend turned into an opportunity to claim for the first time a church home – in which my voice as a woman would be welcomed in leadership. Little did I know when I first walked into ELPC in 1997 that 10 years later I would be called to serve as the Associate Pastor of a congregation that I had already had the opportunity to love.

ELPC is fertile ground for God’s opportunities to play out in our own lives and in our world. Look within and look around, and you will notice, here, how God has created opportunities:

- For those marginalized by other congregations, and sometimes, even, by their families, to be fully included as a part of God’s family.
- For brothers and sisters to worship together across societal dividing lines of race, class, gender, sexual identity, age and ability.
- For all persons to offer their gifts to the work of God’s kingdom – by making a meal for someone who is hungry, a card for someone who is sick, by going on a mission trip to Bolivia or Washington DC or the Jersey Shore, by painting houses in Garfield or singing Christmas Carols at a nursing home.
- To partner with missionaries in Garfield, Egypt and Bolivia.
- To laugh, to learn, to sing, to serve, to ask questions, to find a voice, to lift our voices in worship.

In just a moment we will have one of many chances to respond, with gratitude, to all that God has done for us – to put our commitment to God into action. We will be invited to bring forward our pledge cards as an act of faith – **dedicating our gifts to God’s service through the live and ministries of this congregation.** Our offering is a response to all that God has first done for us. We have an opportunity to join with God in creating a lasting legacy here at ELPC for the continued building up of God’s kingdom.

What is YOUR story? What has God done for you? **What IS God doing in our life?** What blessings have you received? Even if it is simply the blessing of a new day and the breath of life, such a gift is, truly, a miracle.

As we enter a time of silence, I invite you to remember God’s blessings in your life, to recall how God made you, redeemed you and sustains you each day. Then discern how you might respond to God’s grace, in faith, hope and love.

Amen.