

May 29, 2016

TEXT: Galatians 1:1–12

TITLE: Wrong Choices

The song is called “Stars and the Moon.” A young woman is sure that all she wants is to live a life like the movie stars lead. And when a young man offers her stars and the moon, hope, strength and love, she responds, “I’d rather have a yacht and champagne.” But after she gets those things and more, she stops and realizes she’s made a wrong choice and is filled with regret.

The circumstances may vary from person to person, but it’s amazing how common this feeling is. Regret – disappointment – buyer’s remorse – heartache – grief – repentance. It’s actually a theologically rich emotion. The classic description of someone who made a wrong choice is the parable of the Prodigal Son, the young man who takes his father’s inheritance, squanders it unwisely, ends up knee-deep in pig pens when he decides to return home. Everyone loves the next part of that story—the loving father there on the hillside waiting with open arms to welcome the son home and kill the fatted calf. And yes, God is like that. But honestly, sometimes the person waiting on the hillside is the apostle Paul who wrote to the Galatians, standing there with his arms crossed saying, “I am astonished at you.” Of the two options, we much prefer the father ready to embrace us and throw a party when we finally return home, as opposed to Paul who is like an angry parent sitting on the front porch when we had hoped to sneak into the house after breaking curfew.

Now, I don’t want to be too hard on Paul, but he is clearly irritated at the Galatians. Normal letters from Paul to the early church open with a greeting followed by words of thanksgiving, giving thanks to God for their faithfulness and good works on behalf of the gospel of Christ. But in this letter to the Galatians, Paul skips the thanksgivings altogether and immediately starts scolding them. He chides them for “so quickly deserting the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel.” Evidently some other missionaries had arrived in town and convinced them that believing in Jesus Christ was not enough—that they had to follow all the laws of the Old Testament and submit to circumcision in order to be welcome in the house of God. Paul’s whole ministry was focused on sharing the good news that we are saved by grace through faith, not through works—not through trying to earn God’s love. Over and over he preached that the grace of Christ our Savior is fully sufficient for our salvation. And now these Galatians were backsliding into old habits—putting an unnecessary barrier between themselves and Christ; in effect, making a wrong choice.

Again, I don’t want to be too hard on Paul, and neither do I want to be too hard on the Galatians, because we’ve all made decisions we regret. We’ve all allowed something to come between us and the good choice right in front of us. We know better, but we choose wrongly—we overindulge—we give in to our demons, we let ourselves be tempted, we compromise our standards just a little bit. We step

off the path of righteousness and before long we find ourselves lost in the woods. Anyone who's been to a 12-Step meeting or spent time talking to a therapist knows that the only way out of the woods is to re-trace your steps and recognize honestly where you went wrong. Usually that means recognizing that your wrong choice pulled you away from something precious and life-sustaining. Real love can't be sustained without trust. Worthwhile prosperity cannot be gained without virtue. True success doesn't happen without hard work, and a joyful, peaceful heart isn't possible without a humble, faithful spirit.¹

Too often we have a type of spiritual schizophrenia—a split between what we want to do and what we actually end up doing. Paul himself wrote, “*I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*” (Rom 7:15) Sometimes we make wrong choices out of feeling powerless, captive to some other force, or helpless in that moment to choose what is right. Now, I want to say a bit more about this, but brace yourself, because I'm about to mention “he who must not be named.” Political analysts are frantically trying to understand the growing appeal for Donald Trump. One poll says that a high percentage of his support comes from white males who never graduated from college. To me that feels like a simplistic and unfair stereotype. More recently, a RAND Institute survey asked people to consider this statement: “People like me don't have any say about what government does.” Those who agreed with that were 87% more likely to prefer Trump. This feeling of powerlessness was a better predictor of Trump support than age, race, college attainment, income, or attitudes towards Muslims or immigrants. In the coming months, if the core issue is that American voters feel disconnected from and powerless in relation to Washington, no amount of campaign money or attack ads is going to change that. The Trump and Sanders' campaigns have hit upon this disconnect in our political process and things won't get better until we honestly try to heal this fundamental divide.

We are divided individuals spiritually and divided communities and nations. The conflicts around Freddie Gray and Black Lives Matter are not just about cases of police brutality but around a system that treats African American citizens as expendable and acceptable targets for a flawed criminal justice system. The recent law in North Carolina is not about being safe in public bathrooms but about trying to deny the fundamental right of transgender people to name their God-given sexual identity. The frustration over the wealthiest 1% is not about pitchfork-waving mobs storming gated communities but about public policies that imprison people working full-time jobs into conditions of perpetual poverty. Wrong, divisive choices, both personal and political, lead to broken spirits, mindsets of powerlessness and lives held captive to injustice instead of set free by the grace of God.

So how do we amend our wrong choices? I recently read a fascinating short little article titled “How to Take a Punch.” That's not necessarily a skill I plan on developing as a pastor, but I was curious what the writer, a female boxer, had to

say about this. Her first line was this: “Don’t close your eyes. Squeezing your eyes shut won’t lessen the pain. Try to avoid even blinking. Watch the fist come in and learn from it.”² OK, there’s an understatement—watch the fist come in and learn from it! However, what she is saying is right, especially about keeping our eyes open. If you’re in a bad place, if you’ve made a wrong choice and ended up in a mess, the first thing to do is to open your eyes—look around and honestly see where you are. Name the mistakes, the sins, fear or addictions that led to where you are. Something made you veer off the path of righteousness. Take stock of your life; look around until you find the path that leads you back to where you ought to be.

When Paul was upset with the Galatians, he said, “*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the gospel of Christ.*” Therein lies another clue on how to correct our wrong choices. The Galatians thought that something besides the grace of Christ was needed for them to be saved. They thought the old ways of following the purity laws and getting circumcised would open the gates to God’s kingdom glory; but that approach only meant they were erecting a barrier between Christ and themselves and others, especially those who weren’t getting circumcised. Earlier they’d warmly received the good news from Paul about how in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free—no more divisions and categories of who’s in and who’s out. Why had they deserted that good news? They needed to open their eyes, turn around, and come home to Christ.

We had a staff retreat this past Wednesday, a time away to reflect on the challenges and joys of serving this amazing church. Betty Voigt, a retired minister, led our devotions and when she read from Psalm 131, one phrase stood out to me: *I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.* A child that is young and still nursing returns to its mother’s breast because it needs food; it comes to eat. But a child that is weaned no longer comes to the mother because it’s hungry. Rather it comes because it is there that it is at peace. It finds comfort in the mother’s arms, in that familiar place of calm and nurture, safety and love. Wherever the child might be, especially if she or he is feeling anxious or afraid, returning to the mother’s embrace brings quiet and calming peace.

To correct our wrong choices first requires an open-eyed examination of the false paths we’ve traveled and mistakes we’ve made. But after that comes an intentional return to the safe place of God’s forgiving grace, Christ’s unconditional love, and the Spirit’s healing mercy. God gives us second chances, often by freely gifting us again with what we once rejected.³ Like a weaned child, we return back to God’s embrace—to that place of nurture and forgiveness. Paul was right about this with the Galatians and is right about this for us – let nothing get between you and this embrace; let nothing impede the gospel of Christ; let nothing block your ears or close off your soul from the song of faith. When we’re

feeling lost and weary, then listen to the song of Christ—its melody of grace and love will not let you down.

AMEN

¹ Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, Introduction Democracy in America, “I see other men who seek to reduce man to a material being. They look for what is useful without concern for what is just; they seek science removed from faith and prosperity apart from virtue.”

² Malia Wollan, “How to take a Punch”, (boxer Claressa Shields); New York Times Magazine, May 15, 2016, p. 33.

³ Doris Donnelly, Spiritual Fitness, p. 57.