

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Perfect Season: The Blessed Life”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 7:13-29

The rapids were ahead, so we steered our canoes to the side of the river and got out to survey what was ahead. Normally we would have simply pushed right on through, but these rapids were in the shape of a sweeping “S”. And at one of the curves of the “S” was a large cypress tree. And by large I mean with a diameter of between eight and ten feet. My older brother David and his canoe partner made the determination that the only way to navigate these rapids was to stay dead in the center of the channel, because on one side were the rocks and on the other was the tree. With the plan made we are got back into our canoes and set sail, my younger brother Richard and I in a canoe behind David and his partner who led the way. As we approached the curve something unexpected happened. My brother’s canoe began to drift further and further to the right and closer and closer to the cypress. I wondered what they were up to...until they hit the tree, while Richard and I sailed right on pass. A bit later when we were all together I made the mistake of saying, “I thought we were supposed to stay in the middle?” I don’t remember David’s exact response, but it was not brotherly.

For me, this has always been one of those great images of how life works. We plan, we prepare and then nothing goes as we had thought it would. We go and get an M.B.A. which offers us the best leadership and management techniques. Then we go to work for a corporation or business full of plans and hopes, until the culture overwhelms us and we get squeezed into the traditions of those who had come before us. Or, we go to college and get a degree in teaching. We learn all of the wonderful tricks and techniques that will allow us to be great teachers; until we get one of those classes. One of those classes filled with squirrely boys and all of our best laid plans go out the window. Or we decide that we will be the best parents. We take Love and Logic, we read the right books and we think we are doing well, until our thirteen year old daughter, rolls her eyes and sighs when we try and tell her something. And again, all of the best laid plans for being a non-anxious calm parent go to pieces. We know what we are supposed to do, but in certain moments cultures and events get the best of us.

I offer you this image because it is at the heart of both of our stories this morning. Each concerns people knowing what they are supposed to do, but finding themselves in places where it is not easy to do.

Our first story is of the people of God getting ready to leave the wilderness and head to the Land of Promise. What we need to remember here is that the people Moses is addressing are not those

whining, complaining folks who had been liberated from captivity in Egypt and all they did was gripe. No the people Moses is addressing are those who have been with him for a generation; who had come of age with the Torah, the Law which gave them a vision of and instructions for how life was supposed to be lived. They had seen God's providing for them. They had witnessed God's miraculous leading and protection. Now they were headed to the land controlled by others, whose cultures would tempt God's people to forget all that they had learned and go after other gods and other ways of being community. In a sense the danger was that their canoe would head away from the middle of the stream and into the tree. So Moses challenges them to make a conscious choice of how they will live. He refers to it as choosing life; as choosing the life they know that they are supposed to live. He wants them to do more than think about living appropriately. He wants them to choose to do it.

Our second story mirrors our first. Jesus, as I have mentioned before, is portrayed in Matthew as the new Moses. His Sermon on the Mount is the giving of the "new law" just as Moses had done at Sinai. Now we find Jesus getting ready to head down the mountain, thus sending the people out into the new land; a land whose culture is one that will draw them away from what they have just heard and back into ways that offer death rather than life. He warns the people that what mattered was doing what they had been taught by him. Just as the people of God were to follow the Law and not just believe in it, the people who had heard Jesus speak were to do what they had been taught to do. Listen again to verse 24, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts upon them, will be like a wise man who built his house upon a rock." Similarly in verse 21 he says, "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." The focus is on becoming the fruitful tree and the luxuriant vine. The lives of God's people were to actually demonstrate the love of God in the world.

Over the years I have found this scripture to be one that bothers people more than almost any other in the New Testament. The language about doing rather than believing and about people calling Jesus "Lord" and then being sent away seems to run counter to everything that we have been taught about being saved by grace through faith. It seems very un-Jesus-like. It certainly seems very un-grace-like. So in order to wrap our heads around this story what I believe we need to remember that this story is not about salvation in the traditional sense of the word. This story and Jesus's comments have to do with living a blessed life. Let me explain. When Moses addressed the people of God, his focus was "life." He says, "...therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God." Moses understood that God's plan for God's people was a blessed life; that they have a life in community in which everyone had enough, in which there was love and compassion, in which there was justice and mercy. This was the blessed life. In order to have that kind of life, the people had to do more than believe Moses, they had to choose to do what Moses taught them to do.

Jesus is proclaiming the same message. If the people of God want to have a blessed life then they need to do what Jesus told them to do. They need to do more than say "Lord, Lord."

They need to consciously choose to be obedient. They have to choose the right direction for their canoes. If they do so then their lives and the life of the community will be one which is full of love, grace, equity and justice. It will be a blessed life.

When you and I walk out of these doors, turn our cell phones back on, get back on our ipads, open the newspaper and listen to our televisions, we will be walking into the land of promise just as surely as did those who listened to Moses and Jesus. We will be entering a land which can, if we let it, convince us, as I have said before that our worth and value are measured by achievement, accumulation and appearance; a culture that will see us merely as consuming machines; a culture that wants us to be afraid of everyone and everything, so that we live lives of insecurity. Or, we can choose to live into a life of blessing. We can choose to forgive as we have been forgiven, to share with the poor, to love our neighbors, to speak the truth, to live humbly, to be faithful in our relationships, to be in community...in other words to do what Jesus taught. And in so doing find the blessed life.

The challenge then that I would like to offer you for this week is this, to ask yourselves, how am I intentionally choosing life? How am I intentionally choosing to do what Jesus has taught me to do so that I might find a life of blessing?