Sunday, February 1, 2004
IT'S YOUR CHOICE
Luke 4:21-30

The freedom to choose, what a wonderful gift. You can choose to be happy or you can choose to be sad. You can choose to act or you can choose to react. You can choose to resent another person's good fortune or you can rejoice with them. You can choose to worry about what tomorrow might bring, or you can choose to not worry about it. The one freedom that no one can take from you is what attitude you are going to have in any given situation. It's your choice.

When Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue and preached a sermon on the text from Isaiah, he spelled out the implications of that text. Some people who heard him chose to believe him, and others chose to reject him. It's not surprising. When you tell people what they don't want to hear, even if it's the truth, it can make them very angry.

In his sermon, Jesus told them that with his coming, God's train of salvation was moving. That was good news! Then he told them that they were not the only ones who were going to be on the train. That made many of them angry — so angry that they drove him out of the synagogue and would've pushed him over a cliff if it had been possible.

The passion to hate is often stronger than the passion to praise. People tend to hate with far more passion than they admire. It's your choice.

Why did many of the people in that synagogue choose to resent what Jesus said and thereby hate him? Their resentment was caused by an issue far more serious than the fact that here was a familiar hometown young man who was preaching to them.

Here's what caused their anger and resentment. They had heard that he had begun his ministry in Capernaum, which had a large non-Jewish population. They didn't like that at all. Then Jesus reminded them of some Old Testament stories they didn't want to hear. He told them about Elijah and Elisha, two of the most admired Old Testament prophets. He described how they took God's favor to non-Jews and how God blessed them in their ministry.

These two stories were in their scriptures and were well known to them. He could've also told the story of how God sent Jonah to preach to the Ninevites and how they gladly received the good news of God's grace. That story was also well known to them. Anger and resentment are often the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition, which they would just as soon forget.

The good news Jesus announced was that the train was departing the station for the promised land. The reign of God's peace was breaking into their lives. But the bad news was that there would be no reserved seats or first-class compartments on this train. No matter how much they wanted to hear that the kingdom of God had come only for them, Jesus told them it had come for the whole world. Later, Jesus said, "God so loved the world."

It's been true throughout the history of religion. There are people who choose to be offended when they learn that God's grace extends to those they do not approve of. One of the most alluring and destructive temptations of religious movements is exclusivity.

Why do some people choose to be exclusive and therefore become resentful and even miserable? Here are some of the reasons:

First, there are those people — and I hope you are not one of them — who get their security from thinking of themselves as exclusive. They believe, “God loves me more than you. That makes me better than you.”
However, it’s been my experience that people who consider themselves exclusive are not really happy, but miserable. That’s because they doubt their dreams and refuse to consider any new ways of thinking or seeing the world.

As I mentioned earlier, when Jesus finished preaching his first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Luke tells us that at first the people were amazed. They couldn’t believe it. They said, “Isn’t he the son of Mary and Joseph? We watched him grow up. Who does he think he is?” Then, when he began to apply the sermon to them, instead of considering new possibilities, they got mad and threw him out.

To repeat what I said earlier, what made the hometown folks so angry was that Jesus began to describe God’s love as not having any limits, as if there were no fence around God’s love. In addition to seeing themselves as the recipients of God’s love, they made the spiritually dangerous assumption that they were the controllers of God’s love. They believed they could determine who received that love and who did not.

Jesus not only directly challenged that assumption, but he also reminded them of stories from their own religious tradition that challenged it.

Do you want to be miserable? One way to become miserable is to refuse to consider any new possibilities for yourself and others, and to continue to believe you can limit God’s love.

Take the story of Thomas A. Edison as an example. As a child, Edison did not appear to be matched for greatness. His father was unemployed with no formal schooling, and his mother was a teacher. Edison, born in Port Huron, Michigan, was estimated to have an IQ of 81. He was withdrawn from school after three months and was considered backward by school officials. He had entered school two years late due to scarlet fever and respiratory infections, and he was going deaf. His emotional health was poor. He was stubborn, aloof, and showed very little emotion. He liked mechanics and fire, once burning down his father’s barn. Despite these challenges, Edison went on to become one of the world’s greatest inventors.

Another story is that of Eleanor Roosevelt. Born into a troubled home with an alcoholic father and a sickly childhood, Roosevelt didn’t seem destined for greatness either. Yet, despite others doubting her, she pursued her dreams and became a champion for the oppressed.

In both cases, these individuals chose to believe in their potential, despite what others thought of them. It’s your choice. You can choose to pursue your dreams, or you can give up before trying. You can choose to believe God’s love is unlimited or that it is exclusive.

A second reason some people choose to be exclusive and become resentful is that they refuse to change in any way the circumstances of their lives. They simply choose to give in to them. Have you ever done that? Told yourself that life is unfair and there’s nothing you can do about it? Have you accepted that you’ve been dealt a lousy hand and might as well live with it?
Of course, there is a randomness in life. You cannot choose your parents or the circumstances of your birth. There is unfairness. But the key is your attitude toward it.

Rabbi Kushner, in facing the illness and death of his son, recognized that they couldn't change the fact that their son had a terminal illness. They tried to make sense of it, feeling guilty and angry at first. But then they made the choice to stop feeling guilty and miserable. They couldn't change the circumstances, but they could change their attitude toward them.

One of the keys to living in a world of unfairness is to admit that life is unfair, but to find joy and purpose anyway. Someone once said, "Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is like expecting the bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian."

If you want to continue being resentful, keep asking, "Why me?" But if you want to grow, accept that some things cannot be changed, and then choose to change your attitude and use the circumstances for a higher good.

Dr. Rollo May, the psychotherapist, wrote: "Most people shrink when in despair or depression, but it can also be used constructively, as an opportunity." Despair can clear away the false answers and superficialities that weigh you down.

There's an old story about a man who wrote to the Department of Agriculture asking how to get rid of the crabgrass in his lawn. The department gave several suggestions, but nothing worked. Frustrated, the man wrote again, saying none of the methods had eliminated the crabgrass. The department replied, "We suggest you learn to love it."

It's your choice. Amen.