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 her. 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 home-town synagogue and preached a sermon on the text from Isaiah,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," and then began to spell 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 that 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.

It's amazing! The passion to condemn is frequently 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 home town 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 to

make matters worse, in defending his actions he reminded them of some Old Testament stories which 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 the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they would just as soon forget.

As I said earlier, the good news had been announced. 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 compartment 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 has 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. One of the most alluring and destructive temptations of religious movements is

that their adherents tend to become exclusive, arrogant and self-righteous and then resentful.

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

1. First, there are those people and I hope you are not one of them, who get their security from thinking of themselves as exclusive. 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

possibilities. They are locked in to one way of thinking and seeing the world.

As I mentioned earlier, when Jesus finished preaching his first sermon in his home-town 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 home town folks so angry was that Jesus began to describe God's love as not having any limits. Like

many people still today, they had always believed there was a 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 could determine who received that love and who did not.

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

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

The parents of a child were somewhat mis-matched. The child's father was unemployed with no formal schooling. The child's mother was a teacher. This child 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. The child had entered school two years late due to scarlet fever and respiratory infections. He was going deaf. His emotional health was poor. He was stubborn, aloof, and showed very little emotion. He liked mechanics. He also liked to play with fire and burned down his father's barn. He showed some manual dexterity, but used very poor grammar. He did have a dream. He wanted to be a scientist or a railroad mechanic.

This young man from Port Huron, Michigan became one of the world's greatest inventors, Thomas A Edison. People who knew him were sure he would never amount to anything. However that did not stop him from choosing to pursue his dreams.

Another story of a young woman is similar. She didn't show much promise either. She was born of an alcoholic father and as a child was sickly, bedridden and often hospitalized. She was considered erratic and withdrawn. She would bite her nails and had numerous phobias. She wore a back-brace because of a spinal defect and would constantly seek attention. She was a daydreamer with no specific vocational goals, although she expressed a desire to help the elderly and the poor.

This awkward and sickly young woman became a champion of the oppressed—Eleanor Roosevelt.

In spite of the fact that other people doubted that she would ever become much, she didn't doubt her dreams or refuse to see new possibilities.

It's your choice. You can choose to pursue your dreams or you can give up before trying.
The fact that the people in the home town synagogue did not think Jesus would ever amount to anything did not stop him. You can choose to believe God's love is unlimited or that it is exclusive.

2. A second reason some people choose to be exclusive and in so doing become resentful and

even miserable is because they believe they cannot change in any way the circumstances of their lives. They simply choose to give in to them. Have you ever done that? Tell yourself that life is unfair and there's nothing you can do about it. You have been dealt a lousy hand in the card game of life so you might as well accept it. All that is bad that has ever happened to you is the result of your unfortunate circumstances.

Of course, there is a randomness in life. You could not choose your parents or the place or circumstances of your birth. There is unfairness and unevenness. All you can do is to admit that and come to terms with it. Then you can choose the attitude toward it.

Rabbi Kushner said that when he and his wife learned that their three-year old son had progeria and would not have a normal life, and would die in his early teens which he did, they knew they could not trade him in for a healthier child.

The first thing they tried to do was to make some sense of it. They felt guilty and miserable. What had they done that they were being punished for? They were angry with God. Why did God do this to a family that deserved better? But then they made the choice that they didn't like feeling guilty and miserable. They didn't like being estranged from God. They couldn't change the circumstances of

their son's illness, but they could change their attitude toward it.

They discovered that the key to saving them was to first admit that there is a lot in this life that doesn't make any sense. Bad things happen to good people—tragic death, accidents, fires, shootings, terminal illnesses in children and more. The longer you insist on perfection, the longer you insist on every ending being a happy one, the longer you insist on everything coming out even, the more you are going to be miserable.

Thus one of the keys to living in a world of unfairness is to admit that life is unfair, and to find the hand of God not solely in the precision,

evenness and the goodness of life, but also in the resiliency of the human spirit; in the ability of people to go on living joyfully in spite of the unfairness. Someone 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.”

However if you want to continue to be resentful and bitter, then in your suffering continue to ask, “Why does it happen?” or “Why does it happen to me?” That can be a good question if you are trying to determine why it happened so you can prevent it from happening again. But if you ask it because you believe you are always being persecuted and

therefore you always feel sorry for yourself, it won't help you get out of your misery. It's your choice.

There are some things that happen to you that cannot be changed. Life is unfair. But if you cannot always change the circumstances, you have the choice and the ability to change your attitude and to use the circumstances for a higher good. Jesus taught that over and over again.

Dr. Rollo May, the psychotherapist wrote: "Most people shrink when in despair or depression, but it can also be used constructively, as an opportunity. The despair can then act upon the person like the story of Noah's flood in Genesis; it can clear away the vast debris, the false answers, superficial

principles, and leave the way open for new possibilities, and for new freedoms."

There's an old story about a man who wrote to the Department of Agriculture in his state to find out how to cope with the crabgrass that was spoiling his lawn. The department responded with a number of suggestions. The man tried them all, but he could not completely eliminate the crabgrass. Exasperated, he wrote the Department again, noting that every method they suggested, failed. His yard still had crabgrass. He got back a short reply. "We suggest you learn to love it."

It's your choice. Amen.