

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

August 15, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Hard Choices

Hebrews 11:29-12: 2, Luke 12: 49-56

In order to give us a foundation for today's Interpretation of the Word, we must back track a bit to the beginning of chapter 11 of Hebrews where it says: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

Faith is an essential part of any hard choice we make in life. A hard choice is making a decision on something very important in our lives and/or the lives of others that may involve two or more options. **And**, we are not sure of the outcome. Today's scriptures involve hard choices whose outcomes were not fully known or whose results were not readily visible to those Involved. These choices were not about mundane things, but concerned life changing and even life threatening decisions. Faith was involved in making these hard choices, for those who made them did not know how things would turn out. Let us look at the hard choices made, and the people involved.

First, we begin with Jesus. The very same Jesus who spoke the following comforting words last week to soothe our anxieties, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom;" now warns us: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;" E-gads! What is happening here?

Who is this Jesus that speaks in such an upsetting manner? Again, it is the same Jesus who told us last week, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." He is shaking us from our false sense of peace to recognize that we human beings have a tough time choosing between following and serving him who is eternal, and giving ourselves to this world that is not. Jesus understands how we as human beings tend to chose tactile things that give us immediate satisfaction as opposed to the future hope of the resurrection he promises. He understands how we prefer instant results rather than the long term processes involved in sharing his love and ways of living. He is not happy about it and plans to change us over time by his purifying fire of judgment and baptism of death and resurrection. He is awakening us to the hard choice we must make between the creator and the creation. One will save us and one will not.

Of course, Jesus wants us to choose him over all else. He gave his life, his body, blood and very soul on the cross to make it possible for us to do so with clarity of mind and purpose. At the same time, he is warning us that the initial results of choosing him may not always be pleasant. He is giving us fair notice that making him the treasure of our lives and hearts can mean that people very close to us, and who we love dearly

might turn against us for putting him first in our lives. In the culture of his day, family too often had first place over God, just as it has in some parts of our culture. This is idolatry. To counter this, Jesus says, “You must put family in second place behind me. For, in serving me first, you are doing what is right in the long run for your family.”

I have known of teens in dysfunctional families who became Christians, and who made the ways of Jesus Christ their primary focus. In doing so, they helped their families to become healthy again. I have watched parents put Christ first and over time it resulted in the redemption of a wayward child. I have seen marriages healed; the passion for alcohol brought under control and lives brought back from edge of disasters when Jesus was number one. I know from personal experience the life saving value of choosing to continue to follow Jesus Christ and have his fire and baptism renew me rather than allow the death of a beloved child destroy me. Some of you know all this, too. Some of us continue to chose Jesus Christ over all else in the midst of messy relationships, and hope and pray for good to come from it. Sometimes we see success. Other times we know we may not live to see it, but we have faith God’s goodness will win out.

Yet, I also know of cases where family members have rightly chosen Jesus Christ as their Lord, have chosen to live by his love and healthy ways, and it resulted in a divorce or a never ending alienation because the other party or parties refused to chose him, too. This is sad and Jesus told us this could happen. In some countries today the result of the hard choice for Christ can even be tougher to live with.

“A 17-year-old girl in the Gedo Region of Somalia was recently severely beaten by her family after they discovered she had converted to Christianity, according to Compass Direct News. Nurta Mohamed Farah, 17, was later taken to a doctor, who prescribed medication for a ‘mental illness.’ When she refused to abandon her Christian faith, her family forced her to take the medication.”

“Nurta’s family has read Islamic scripture to her twice a week since May 10, when they learned of her conversion. Somalis traditionally believe that the Quran cures the sick — especially the mentally ill.” “Nurta has been shackled to a tree during the day and held in a small, dark room at night, according to Compass. “There is little the community can do about her condition, which is very bad,” a Christian source told Compass. “I have advised our community leader to keep monitoring her condition but not to meddle for their own safety. ... We need prayers and human advocacy for such inhuman acts and for freedom of religion for the Somali people.” Nurta made a hard choice of faith that may take time for good to result from it. She may not live to see the good that God brings from this, but it is the right choice. This is what Jesus is warning us about and calling us to do.

The late first century Christians, to whom the Hebrews letter, or some say ‘sermon’ was written, experienced the persecution Jesus warned us about. They had made the hard choice of faith to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and were not sure of the results to come from it. If we were to take time to read through Hebrews we would find that those people were “second generation Christians (2:1; 2:3; 13:7); Who had come through tough times (10:32). Many were publicly ridiculed (10:33). A number of their leaders apparently were killed (13:7). At least some of them had their property confiscated (10:34).

Although most had not been martyred, many had spent time in prison (10:34; 13:3.) They knew the Hebrew scriptures well. They had practiced Hebrew religious ceremonies in the past. But they were likely Gentile in ethnic background having come into Judaism in the first place by way of conversion (10:32).” In becoming Christians, they knew what Jesus meant about the division deciding for him could bring, and were encouraged to live by faith that God’s goodness would result from what they could not yet see or might never see. “Emphasis,” 8/8/10

The great Presbyterian teacher, Thomas Long writes: To give these people hope and encouragement, the preacher of Hebrews, in a rhythmic way speaks of a parade of heroes from the Old Testament who appear to be walking through that sanctuary. They were “Righteous people, who journeyed obediently and who were tested by suffering.” “But just as this parade of faith” heroes “has nearly reached that church door, the drumbeat stops and the Preacher halts” or, pauses. He stares at the congregation for **half a beat**, then sweeps his arm in a slow backward movement, as if to wend his way back down the pathway his words have just traveled, as if to gather in a single gesture the whole assembly of faithful ancestors lined up as far as the eye can see, as if to retrace the arc he has just traversed of all the men and women of old who trusted in the promises of God. Then he says, slowly and deliberately, these telling words: ‘Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised.’”

“All that faith, all that righteousness, all that suffering, all those endless miles of journeying, and they ‘did not receive what was promised.’” That congregation has heard this before, but even so, the protest ‘But why?’ begins to rise in their throats. Before it can find a voice, though, the Preacher explains: ‘God provided something better . . .’ The congregation knows, of course, that the Preacher means Jesus. The word ‘better’ connected to Jesus has been a constant refrain: Jesus is ‘better than the angels,’ and he introduces a ‘better hope’ and guarantees a ‘better covenant’ with ‘better promises’ and sealed with ‘better sacrifices,’ and all of this allows us to possess an inheritance from God that is ‘better.’ So it comes as no surprise that these faithful ancestors did not receive the promise until the coming of Jesus. As people of faith, they were leaning forward in hope, searching for no earthly homeland but for the city whose architect and builder is God, waiting for a ‘better resurrection.’ Their hopes could not be fulfilled; their quest could not be satisfied; their desire for resurrection could not be met until there was a better high priest, ‘a Son who has been made perfect forever.’ Only Christ the Son sanctifies and saves.”

“What he is saying is that the high-priestly ministry of Jesus Christ establishes a great unbroken cord of faith that stretches from the beginning of human history all the way into the heavenly sanctuary in the City of God, where the cord has been securely fastened and anchored by Jesus.

“So now this great cord is passing through the sanctuary of the Preacher’s congregation,” and to us. “It is their turn” and our turn “to form the human links of faith that join the whole chain to ‘Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.’ The time has come, then, for the Preacher to ‘strike fire,’ to stir the souls of his congregation, to get them up out of the pews and on the march to Zion. He does so by **subtly shifting the**

**metaphor.** Instead of the image of a pilgrimage or of an unbroken chain of faith, the Preacher now takes his congregation (and us) to the sports arena and drafts them (and us) as the final runners in a great relay race of faith. The baton has been passed from” the earliest heroes of the faith, to “each runner handing it on to the next. Now, it is that congregation’s” and our congregation’s turn to take the baton of faith and run. “The previous runners have taken their seats in the stadium—‘we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses’—and all are watching to see how we will perform.”

“The Preacher knows that it is late in the day, and that we have already run several sprints and dashes. We are winded and tired, but this is the race that counts, so we are to strip off anything that would slow us down—all the weighty encumbrances and shackling sins —and run our portion of the race with endurance. The trail has already been blazed; the path of the race has already been forged by Jesus. He is the lead runner, and he shows us where to go, since he is the ‘pioneer,’ the one who sets the course. He also shows us how to run, since he is the one who runs the race with flawless form, the ‘perfecter of our faith.’ Indeed, it is Christ who makes it possible for us to run at all.”

“Moreover, he teaches us how to handle the long hills, how to get a second wind when the going gets hard: keep your eyes on the prize, never lose sight of the Sabbath rest that awaits those who endure. Jesus himself kept his eyes on the prize, ‘the joy that was set before him.’ The goal of the race for Jesus was not only a seat ‘at the right hand of the throne of God,’ but the joy of bringing with him the other runners, of ‘bringing many children to glory, of crossing the finish line and saying, ‘Here am I and the children God has given me’”.

“For the sake of this joy, then, he” made the hardest choice of any of us and in complete faith in God “endured the disgrace and pain of the cross, “disregarding its shame,” and was raised from the dead by God to live forever more. And because he lives, we shall live also. [Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews](#), pages 125-129, John 14:19

If you are still sitting on the sidelines wrestling with the hard choice of who to give your life to in faith, see Jesus reaching out to you with the chord of life. Allow him to pull you into the race where he hands you the baton of faith that guides you across the finish line to receive the prize of salvation in him. Now is the time to get up off your seat, make the hard choice, put Jesus Christ first and win the race of everlasting life.