

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, August 25, 2024

“Choosing to Abide, Day after Day”

The Message

We are faced with the task of decision-making all day, every day.

Often, the decisions we need to make are small or seemingly insignificant – choosing what outfit to wear for the day, which shoes are best going to meet my needs today, will coffee or tea get me off to a better start, should I have a bran muffin or yogurt for breakfast – the list goes on and on.

And of course, sometimes the decisions we are faced with are much harder, and some could take days, weeks, months, or even years.

Something like a high school student choosing what universities to apply to, or deciding with your spouse whether or not to replace that old rusted vehicle (and then, what to replace it with), or deciding whether or not to downsize and move into a smaller house.

Sometimes, these decisions can loom over our heads and cloud our judgement about other things.

And then, there are times when we have to wake up every day and choose to commit our lives to something – a change in habits, a partner, a healthier lifestyle, or even our faith.

Some of you who participated in the Going Deeper studies previously were at the session where I showed a clip of Craig Ferguson, a late night talk show host, talking about his struggles with addiction to alcohol.

I won't show the clip here because it's a bit “not suitable for church,” but he makes a point that I thought was valuable to share, both in the context of that discussion, but also in the context of today's scripture passage.

He shared the story of how he realized he had a drinking problem and needed help, and as is often the case in these situations, he had hit absolute rock bottom.

He shared what was very likely a very embarrassing story that probably made him feel quite a bit of shame.

But, in sharing that story, he was able to relate to everyone who has been in similar situations.

And he concluded his story by sharing that he'd now been sober for many years, but he *still* had to wake up every single day and recommit to sobriety.

He would find himself thinking, even so many years later, that maybe he could have just one drink.

But every day, he had to remind himself that he could not allow that to happen.

He had to renew his commitment to sobriety over and over again, every single day, probably for the rest of his life.

And, he admitted that wasn't always easy.

And decisions like that – decisions that could forever alter our lives – are never easy.

Similarly, I have gone through many periods in my life where I have been trying to lose weight and maintain an active and healthy lifestyle.

And it is never easy.

I know, logically, that in order to create long-term, sustained change, I have to wake up every day and choose to stay on track.

And yet, I have repeatedly fallen off track many times throughout my life.

Even though I know what needs to happen - even though I know I have to reduce or eliminate unhealthy food in my house and I have to stick to an exercise plan and I have to eat out less, etc – I often find that it is just easier said than done.

I am sure there are other situations that are relatable – for example, if you are partnered, you have to wake up every day and choose your partner over and over again, even when life has gotten difficult or things are rocky between you.

I think most of us have experienced something like this in our lifetimes, and many of us have something that we need to recommit to every day.

So, now that we can hopefully think of a relatable experience, it may be easier to put ourselves into the shoes of the disciples and the followers of Jesus.

Jesus has just put his followers and his core disciples at a crossroads.

Last week, we read the passage just before today's in which Jesus told the group that was following him that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood abides in him, and he in the person.

That is a really difficult concept to stomach, especially if it's the first time you've heard it!

And, it appears many of his followers took this literally and couldn't understand how eating the flesh of Jesus would bring them closer to God.

I can understand their concern!

Of course, we understand today that Jesus meant this to be symbolic.

Nonetheless, we heard Jesus' followers in today's passage complaining "this is too hard for anyone to understand."

In other words, they're saying this is too difficult, and they are at a point where they need to decide whether or not to keep following Jesus.

Like some of the other examples I gave earlier, making the choice for God and all that God offers is not easy, and it isn't a choice that's made only once.

Choosing God doesn't just happen in one single moment, in one day, or for one month or one year. Choosing God is a lifetime commitment.

It is an important reminder that faith is not easy.

Jesus tells the people that to believe in him, to trust in him, means they must "abide" in him.

They must stay, even though it is a hard path to follow and many lose their way.

Even some of those followers who were among the first choose to turn away at this point.

This just shows us that making the choice for God isn't something we can do once, when it seems fun and easy to follow this guy named Jesus around.

We must choose to follow God, and follow Jesus, every single day our whole life long.

We must abide.

Anything worthwhile requires abiding.

Quitting drinking or smoking, losing weight, maintaining a healthier lifestyle, committing to an educational program or career path, training for an athletic event – it all requires commitment – abiding.

And, like I have done several times, no matter how committed we are, many of us will make mistakes or get off track.

Sometimes, our failures cannot be overcome.

However, when it comes to faith, making a mistake or making a wrong choice is not the end of the story.

John's Gospel and this passage reminds us that we always have a choice.

We can choose to look up at Jesus, or we can turn away.

We can choose to accept or reject the challenge and the promise of the cross and what Peter calls the "words of eternal life" that are always calling to us.

Making the choice to follow Jesus is not always easy, and is not a decision we make once and never think about again.

It is an ongoing, daily decision we must make.

And, as I conclude today's message, I leave you with some questions for pondering.

What might our lives look like if we claimed the promise of the cross every single day?

What if we were no longer afraid of difficult teachings?

What if we were no longer afraid of people who think or act differently than us?

Would we treat other people with more dignity and grace?

Might we allow others to change us for the better?

May we, together, commit to abiding in Jesus, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, for our entire lives.

Amen.

Let us pray:

God of patience, we come before you today in gratitude for your love and care. We ask that you help us to continue to choose to abide in you, day after day for the rest of our lives. Even though sometimes life can be difficult and we can lose our way, we ask that you help us choose to turn to you - to turn to the promise of the cross and trust in your guidance and help. All of this we pray today in your name. Amen.