

Sermon for Sunday, Nov. 10, 2024
(The Sunday after the Presidential election)

Mark 12:38-44

Mark 15:7-15

Martin Luther lived in tumultuous times. When he was feeling especially concerned he would turn to psalm 46. Please turn in the front of your hymnal to that psalm. At the end of the sermon we're going to read it responsively by full verse. For now, all that I ask is that you find it and set your hymnbook aside. There isn't a page number as such—it is located at about page 360 or between the liturgy section and the hymns.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Wednesday evening the Confirmation students played games as a part of class. Four of them played Jenga: a stackable block game that requires steady hands and a light touch. Two of them attempted to set up a row of dominoes with the intention that they could cause a chain reaction of dominoes knocking each other down. Once again actions that required steady hands. Another student assembled the old Mousetrap game that requires not just an ability to put it together but also steady hands so that the trap isn't sprung too soon.

The point that I made to the students is that their actions have consequences. Sometimes we make good choices, sometimes we make poor choices, but good or poor the choices they make have consequences.

The gospel readings for today are also about choices. The setting for both the Mark reading and the Matthew is Holy Week: between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. The setting for the reading from Mark 12 has Jesus near the Temple in Jerusalem. He is teaching and observing the activities near the Temple as other observant Jews prepare for the Passover, a very important holy day on the Jewish calendar. He compares the actions of the rich and comfortable to the choice of the poor widow offering her last two pennies as a gift to the Lord.

Jesus' comments on the choices of the scribes comes just before the offering of the poor widow. From a narrative standpoint these two stories are linked together and it's done for a reason. One interpretation is that it provides a contrast between the rich and

the poor. Another reason is that it provides Jesus with a teachable moment. BUT there is yet another way to consider this event. This scene occurs early in Holy Week. Jesus has not yet been arrested but he knows it's coming. He could choose the path of least resistance. He could leave Jerusalem and abandon his God appointed mission. But he doesn't. He chooses the path of the poor widow opting to give all that he has: his life as a love offering for the redemption of the world.

By way of stark contrast let's consider the scene from Matthew 27:16-26 with Jesus, Pilate and the crowd. Pilate offers the crowd a choice. They can choose to free Barabbas, a known murderer who has been imprisoned for stirring up a revolt against the government. Or they can choose Jesus. Jesus, the one who has committed no crime, but who has certainly stirred things up by angering the religious elite and others in power.

A commentator by the name of Nathan Jennings wrote this: "Before the execution of Jesus, the Roman government gave the local Jewish people a choice of either freeing Jesus, the non-violent revolutionary, or Barabbas, the violent revolutionary. Both promised an end to Jewish oppression and a Kingdom once again ruled by the God of Abraham and Moses. The people chose Barabbas. [Remembering that Barabbas' past actions utilized violence] They chose the way of *peace through violence* over nonviolence. Which of course was no different than the Roman way, or the Greek Way, or the Persian way, or the Babylonian way, or the Egyptian way. The way of all of their past oppressors." (End quote) Every single one of the countries I just named used military might and violence to overcome and enslave not just the Israelites but the rest of their known world. It seems that the default choice of most any human whether 1000's of years ago or in the present is to opt for the way of revolution through violence; especially violence toward others, including the most vulnerable. And Jesus was vulnerable: not because he didn't have the innate power of God but because he refused to use it. He refused to take up arms. He refused to defend himself through violence. He refused to fight.

Nathan Jennings continues, "Here is the scandal of Jesus: On the cross we see Jesus would rather die in the name of love than to kill in the name of freedom. And the story goes that through this death, victory was won. Death was defeated, liberation was inaugurated. The captives were set free. The Kingdom of God broke through.

So, do we still find ourselves choosing Barabbas? I think sometimes we all do. The good news is, even though Barabbas gets chosen, our rejection of Jesus does not stop Him from being victorious. *Because love cannot be stopped.* Resurrection is always on the other side. Through our rejection he still empties himself again and again and again until we find that his way is THE WAY and we begin to empty ourselves too and participate with Jesus in what God is doing in the restoration of all things."

- Nathan Jennings

Choices: my friends we are a people who still choose Barabbas. It is the paradox of our human lives. And yet....and yet, there is a God who loves humanity so thoroughly and deeply that a way is provided for us to reconnect with God even when we choose the non-godly path. A way is provided for the relationship to be restored. And that way is Jesus. In spite of our deep failings, so obvious in the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, God does not give up on us.

Now, you might think that what I'm going to encourage you to do now is "choose Jesus." But you would be wrong. God through Jesus has ALREADY chosen you. Regardless of every choice that you have ever made during this earthly life, there's one choice that isn't yours and that's the one wherein God chose you!

Martin Luther lived in tumultuous times. When he was feeling especially distraught he would turn to psalm 46. Please turn now in the front of your hymnal to that psalm. We're going to read it responsively by full verse. That means that I will read the odd numbered verses and you will read the even ones. There isn't a page number as such—it is located at about page 360 or between the liturgy section and the hymns.

Read Psalm 46.

I close now with one more piece of Scripture, one of my favorites: The apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:38-39 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

No choice that we make can separate us from the love of God, my friends, absolutely no choice. Amen.