

## **“Holy Guidance Counselor”**

“Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding him fast ...”

A question that is frequently asked of children is “what do you want to be when you grow up?” It may start at an early age, when children are focused on emulating their heroes and the important people in their lives such as family members, teachers, and leaders of their community. On Halloween, they may dress up as the persons they think they will be as adults: superheroes, royalty, sports stars, and the popular musicians of their day. As children grow older, their answers may reflect their talents and interests; they may have interests in the arts or music, or have become interested in math and science, or may want to follow a parent into the family business. The answer to that seminal question may change over time, but it reflects a decision that one day all children will have to make: what career path will I choose? What will be the focus of my education or preparation for this career? Will this be a career that will allow me to support myself and my family, and will it be work that will bring me a sense of purpose and accomplishment? It is a decision that has enormous consequences and can at times be overwhelming for children of all ages.

The magnitude of the decision as to what career path one might choose increases as a child advances through high school and must make some critical decisions. If they are choosing a career in trades such as plumber or electrician, it may mean selecting a vocational school or being accepted into an apprentice program. If they wish to serve their community as a police officer, firefighter, or emergency response technician, it means taking exams for admittance to the various academies that train persons for these professions. If their career path will require a university degree, it means exploring the many options that universities have to offer in location, course offerings, career placement, and financial aid. It was this latter path that was the challenge I faced as I entered Grade 11 and began to look at universities to prepare me for what I knew by then was to be my life’s work as a pastor. In the USA, Grade 11 students take an exam known as the PSAT; in the registration form for this exam, you can check a box to receive information from various universities across the country. I checked the box, and soon our mailbox was being inundated with brochures and information from schools both near and far, schools that were familiar to me and schools I never knew existed. Soon I had a box filled with these brochures,

and were thoroughly confused as to how I was even to begin making a choice that would be critical for the course of my life and education to pursue the career to which I know I had been called.

Thankfully, I did not have to make this decision alone. Our high school assigned each student a guidance counselor who met with us to discuss our career goals, help us select courses that would be required for the admittance to a school or apprenticeship, and worked to guide us to make a choice that would be of the most optimal benefit to us. As my box of university brochures began to overflow, my guidance counselor invited me to bring the box into her office so that we could sort through them to find the schools that would be best suited for me. She began by separating them into two piles, the latter of which was for schools that we would not be considering. We then went through the other pile, looking at what the school offered and if it might be a good match for me. Finally, we narrowed the list down to four universities that would offer the academic training that would prepare me for my career path. One of them turned out to be the university I attended, and I have always been thankful for my guidance counselor who helped guide me to the school that has been a blessing to me to this day.

There are times when the choices we face will be critical in determining the course of our lives and the career paths we may travel; in the words of Robert Frost, it is like coming to a place where we encounter *“two roads [that] diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by; and that has made all the difference.”* As it is helpful to have a guide lead us in making such a choice, it is a blessing when we have someone to guide us so that we might choose the way that will lead to a life in which we will find fulfillment and will be able to use the gifts God has given to us to serve others and give glory to God all the days of our life.

Today’s Bible lessons bring us to circumstances in which those who would be followers of God are confronted with the choices they must make to live and serve as God’s holy people. Today’s first lesson from Deuteronomy brings to the conclusion of Moses’ farewell address to the people of Israel, encouraging them to make decisions that will be appropriate for God’s chosen people as he departs after having led them out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness for forty years, and to the brink of their return to the promised land. These words were also addressed to the people of Israel at another critical moment in their history, their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and their exile from the promised land; the message is addressed in this context to a people who were landless, demoralized, and confused, *“a people seeking to find a path of hope in a situation that seemed hopeless.”* (Ronald E. Clements). In both circumstances, the message is one in which God’s

people are encouraged to make choices that will bring them the blessings of God's grace, choices to follow in the path that God has set before them through the giving of the Law by Moses so that *"if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."* (Deuteronomy 30:16). The covenantal choice between life and death, blessing and curse is framed as a matter of agency, of choosing rightly in response to God's command. But sadly, the history of Israel shows how time and again the people failed to live in accordance with God's teachings and expectations, of how Moses' warnings that if they turn away from the path God calls them to travel that *"you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess"* (30:18) and his entreaty that they *"choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him"* (30:19-20) were ignored, with the disastrous consequences the people faced as they found themselves once again enslaved in a foreign land, crying out to God to hear their cries and to come into their presence again.

- "The very faith in the power of the Lord God that seemed to have been discredited and largely disowned by the people is now summoned back into being. The address is therefore a supreme appeal to faith, courage, and hope. If ever the art of rhetoric is needed, it was needed now!" – Clements.

Choices that would change the course of one's life continue to appear throughout Scripture. The prophets who would call the people to repent of the ways that had drawn them away from God so that they might return to the Lord who is *"gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love"* (Joel 2:13) were called by God to proclaim this word of repentance and redemption, with responses ranging from Isaiah's enthusiastic *"here I am; send me!"* (Isaiah 6:8), to Jonah who preferred perishing at sea to bringing God's word to the people of Nineveh that he so despised (*"And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live"* – Jonah 4:3). A young woman in Nazareth is faced with a choice when the angel Gabriel appears to her and announces that *"you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David."* (Luke 1:31-32). Knowing the risks involved in this decision that will change the course of her life, Mary's choice is to announce that *"here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (1:38). When her adult son encounters two sets of brothers who fished the waters of the Sea of Galilee, then invited them to *"follow me, and I will make you fish for people"* (Matthew

4:18). Knowing that the choice to accept this invitation to discipleship will change the course of their lives, first Simon and Andrew and then James and John immediately *“left their nets and followed him.”* (4:20).

The choice to becoming a follower of Jesus and the costs of such a decision is at the heart of our Gospel lesson from Luke in which a large crowd of enthusiastic would-be disciples are following Jesus. Because Jesus is to continue his journey to Jerusalem where he faces martyrdom in order to fulfill God’s plan of salvation, he turns and warns them as his followers they must be prepared to make the choice to leave everything behind and make their commitment to Jesus as complete and all-consuming as was Jesus’ devotion to his mission; *“Jesus warns the crowds in advance that the way of discipleship will not be easy.”* (Alan Culpepper).

- “Jesus’ words are a response to the enthusiasm of persons who seem totally unaware that he is going to Jerusalem and the cross. In sum, his word is: think about what you are doing and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way.” – Fred Craddock.

If it is Jesus’ intention to shock the crowd about the cost of discipleship, he appears to succeed with his declaration that *“whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:26). Such harsh words seem to fly in the face of the teachings of Jesus elsewhere that his disciples are to *“love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12) and his own concern for the care of his mother as he is dying on the cross (*“Woman, here is your son ... Here is your mother”* – John 19:26-27). It is here that we need to understand that Jesus is using a Semitic hyperbole that exaggerates a contrast so that it may be seen more clearly. The word “hate” (*miseo*) does not mean anger or hostility toward another person; it means to turn away or detach oneself from another. There is nothing in this word that compares to the modern emotion that the word “hate” conveys; instead, what Jesus is teaching is that if there is a conflict, one’s response to the demands of discipleship must take precedence over even the most sacred of human relationships. What is demanded of disciples of Jesus is that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ and the Gospel not only take precedence but, in fact, redefine all other relationships; *“there is no duty higher than commitment to Jesus and to being his disciple.”* (Culpepper).

Jesus warns the crowd that no one can follow him unless they are ready to suffer the same fate that Jesus will suffer: *“whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”* (14:27). As a prudent person would not begin a project until

being sure that it can be finished, God has not entered the redemption process without being prepared to complete it, and Jesus did not set his face for Jerusalem without being prepared to face the sacrifice that would be required of him. Likewise, no one should accept the invitation to discipleship without being prepared to forsake everything for the sake of following Jesus; “*if you seek to follow Jesus, then understand first that what is required is all you have.*” (Culpepper).

- “Jesus must therefore make it clear beyond all doubt that the ‘must’ of suffering applies to his disciples no less than to himself. Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion. Discipleship means adherence to the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the Cross.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

As we hear the words of Moses and Jesus and the choices with which we are confronted if we desire to live faithfully as God’s holy people and as disciples of Christ, we may be wondering how we can make such arduous choices on our own, or how we can possibly live up to the demands and expectations that such choices entail? The good news for us on this day in which we consider these choices and their consequences is that we do not need to make such decisions on our own, as I did not make the life-changing decision about choosing a university to continue my career path. As I had a guidance counselor to help guide me in this decision, we have the one who is known as our Holy Counselor who abides with us and guides us in our call to discipleship. In this Sunday of the season of Pentecost, we are reminded of the gift of the Holy Spirit that is our assurance of God’s presence and guidance in all aspects of our lives:

- “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

In his Farewell Discourse to his disciples before his crucifixion, Jesus promises them that they will receive the gift of the *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit who will “*teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*” (John 14:26). It is this presence of God the Holy Spirit who will “*guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you*

*the things that are to come*” (16:13). Through the promise and presence of the Paraclete, the Evangelist proclaims that Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension are not the end but the beginning of a new era in the life of the faith community. The promise that the Holy Spirit will “guide” (*hodgeo*) literally means to “lead in the way,” a word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to point to the instructional role of God in leading the community into right and faithful behavior (*“Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.”* – Psalm 25:5). To say that the Paraclete will guide the disciple into all the truth *“is to say that in the future the Paraclete will lead the community into the life-giving revelation of God in Jesus.”* (Gail O’Day).

- “To choose life after Pentecost is not simply to comply with divine instruction but to step into a relationship where divine initiative and human response meet. What appears a human decision is, at a deeper level, a movement prompted and sustained by God’s Spirit.” \_ Kyong-Jin Lee.

Later this month, I will be returning to the place where I was guided in making the decision as to where I would continue my studies that would lead me on the path that I have travelled across these many decades. Thanks to the assistance of my guidance counselor, I was able to make a choice that has truly made all the difference in my life. The path of discipleship that we have been called to travel by our Lord Jesus Christ will continue to present us with numerous decisions that will have consequences for the ministry we share in this and future generations. These are decisions that we take with great seriousness, but decisions we need not and must not make alone; the calling of the Church in this time after Pentecost is *“to live not by willpower, but by the Spirit; not out of obligation, but in response to grace; not in isolation, but as a covenant people whose life is a witness to the living God.”* (Lee). May we continue to make choices that will bring life, hope and joy to us and to all who we serve, and may our choices always be made in the presence and power of our Holy Guidance Counselor, the Holy Spirit who is our assurance that God is the one who will always lead us and guide us along the way we have been called.

Amen.