

September 20, 2015

6 Choices

The Decision for a New Life

John 3:1-15

Opening words: According to some, the average person makes more than 35,000 decisions in a single day. Most of them are rather simple: where to sit, what to eat at the next meal, what lane to drive in, should I have another cup of coffee, etc. These decisions are easily made and have very few consequences. Other decisions are more serious, with long-lasting effects.

Last week we began looking at six major decisions each one must make in their life. These decisions are not original. They came from Tom Berlin, who is the Senior Pastor of the Floris United Methodist Church in Herndon, Virginia. He says these major decisions will influence not only your time in the world, but they will also influence your eternity. He compiled these six decisions in his book, 6 Decisions that will Change Your Life. Last week we looked at the first decision, *the decision to follow*. This week we look at the second decision, *the decision for a new life*. Our scripture lesson for today is the story of Nicodemus, John 3:1-15.

John 3:1-15 ¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." ⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

If you have watched the news, then you know the story. Refugees are pouring into Europe from the Middle East. Their story is a sad one. Their country, Syria, is in the midst of a civil war. They are leaving everything to escape the violence. Some have estimated approximately eleven million have fled since the violence began in 2011.

Our national news has reported how many have traveled to Hungary. You have seen some of those reports. I do not have a clue how many reports have been filed from that small stretch of railroad track. It is hard to look at the refugees. It was devastating to watch the fence close, leaving some out. The other night they interviewed one of the last ones in. All the stories are different, yet all the stories are the same. This particular man held his children near and said, "I left everything for them. I want to give my children a future." His emotions were thick. Can anyone here question that man's love for his children? He changed his entire life for them. It is the story of the Christian faith; how much are you willing to change for God? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves this morning in the third chapter of John. The storyline of this gospel is different than the synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus cleansing the temple at the end of his ministry; it is part of the climax. John is different. He has Jesus cleansing the temple at the beginning of his ministry (John 2). That fact is important to us for only one reason; Jesus has the attention of some very powerful influential people from the very beginning. One of those powerful influential people was Nicodemus. According to the second half of verse one, he was a member of the Jewish ruling council. That means he had climbed to the very top of his profession. It is safe to say Nicodemus spent his days answering the questions of others. This story is unique because he is the one with the question. With everything that has been written about this passage through the ages, one thing is important to remember. This story is nothing more than a private discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is John, the author and editor, who promotes this private discussion to the public's attention.

In one way the story is simple to understand, in other ways the story is hard to understand. It is simple to understand what happened. It is hard to understand what was being said - in other words, the meaning behind the words between Jesus and Nicodemus. According to verse two, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. That fact alone is confusing. Some say he went at night so the darkness could help hide his true identity. How would it look for a trusted member of society to go to Jesus, a man with no credentials? Others say he went to Jesus at night so the two could talk privately. The business of the day was done. Regardless, Nicodemus went to Jesus because he was impressed by the Master. No ordinary man could have performed such miracles; he must come from God. Jesus hears through these kind words and knows the real topic, salvation! Jesus says in verse three, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Two thousand years later, the world is still wrestling with those words, so we should not be surprised that Nicodemus wrestled with them that night. He thinks Jesus is speaking of physical birth; reentering your mother's womb. Jesus is speaking of spiritual birth. The two are as different as night and day. From the moment you were physically born, you struggled to survive. The goal of life is survival, so the most important person in your universe is you. Spiritual rebirth is different. From the moment you are reborn, the most important person is God. Spiritually immature people live for themselves; spiritually mature people live for God. Which is more important to you?

Are you the center of your universe, or is God the center of your universe? Don't worry about your answer. We all have some work to do.

Let me take you a little deeper. One of our primary understandings of God is that God believes in free will. In other words, God may be directing history, but you are directing your own life. The choices you make are yours, so the burden of responsibility rests on you. So many things in life distill down to a choice. I hope you are choosing wisely. Last week, we talked about the decision to follow Jesus. The primary text was the calling of Andrew, John and Peter. It was not forced upon them; they decided to follow Jesus freely. By your presence here this morning, I assume at some point in your life you decided to follow Jesus. The choice was yours. The same thing is true this week. The choice is yours. Are you going to live a life where you are the center of your own universe? Or have you been born again spiritually, where God is the center of your universe?

This morning I want to help you discover who is at the center of your universe. I am going to do that by having you examine three areas of your life. How do you spend your time? Do you share your God-given talents? How do you spend your money? If you are honest with yourself then you will discover if you have been born again. Remember it all distills down to a choice. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Time

One of the great stories in the Bible is the story of Mary and Martha. It is found in Luke 10:38-42. You know the story as well as I do. Mary and Martha were sisters of Lazarus, the one who Jesus resurrected from the dead. The Master stops there on his way home to Jerusalem. For you see, their town, Bethany, was only two miles from the Golden City. When Jesus arrives, Mary sat at Jesus's feet and hung on every word he spoke. Martha, on the other hand, slaved away doing the necessary duties, cooking and entertaining. That was the traditional role of women at that time. It is Mary who is the trend setter. In time, Martha resents doing all the all work and goes to Jesus to enlist some help. Instead of a helping hand, she receives some divine truth. Do you remember that divine truth? It is a story about priorities. Martha filled her time doing good things; Mary filled her time with the best thing in life, Jesus. How do you fill your time?

It is your choice. Are you going to fill your life with good things, work, family, friends and entertainment? Are you going to fill your life with the best thing, Jesus? Perhaps, this is a better question: how much time do you spend with God? Are you going to spend your time in a way that is pleasing to God? In other words, have you been born again? Are you the center of your universe? Are you living with God in the center of your universe? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Talent

In 1965, Ferdinand Marcos was elected President of the Philippines, which made his wife, Imelda, first lady. They held those posts until 1986, when the entire family fled to

Hawaii. The international news was fascinated with what was left behind. After having ruled a poor country for decades, the inventory was impressive: 15 mink coats, 508 gowns, 1,000 handbags and approximately 7,500 pairs of shoes. (However, *Time* magazine reported she only owned 1,060 pairs of shoes.) For your information, I only own four pairs of shoes; one is an old pair of sneakers for when I work on the lawn. This is the truth. Hundreds of criminal charges have been filed against her, but she has never served a single day, because her children, Imee and Bongbong, hold powerful positions within the federal government. Within a short time, Imelda Marcos was labeled the most selfish person in the world. One can only imagine how the world would have benefitted had she shared her wealth. Do the people in your world consider you selfish?

It is your choice. Are you only going to use what you have for personal gain? Are you going to use what you have to benefit others? This is a better question: Are you going to use your personal talents in a way that is pleasing to God? In other words, have you been born again? Are you living with yourself in the center of your universe? Are you living with God in the center of your universe? I am not just talking about your money, I am talking about your personal talents. This church is filled with talented people; you are a talented person. You know the story. Too much is done by too few. How would this improve if you shared your talents? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Financial Resources

The other night I had a worship committee meeting. I reviewed the worship calendar from now until the end of the year. I will tell you now, Consecration Sunday is scheduled for November 22, the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving. I know the finance committee will be meeting soon to make their plans. I have never shied away from stewardship programs in the life of the church, because they are so Biblical. Jesus spoke more about money than any other topic. I think that is incredible. The Master spoke more about money than love, heaven or forgiveness. Jesus spoke more about money than any other topic because he knew money is so revealing. Nothing exposes our priorities more than how we spend our money. Is there anyone here who would not feed their children to save money? The answer is no. Perhaps this is a better question: If everyone gave as much as you do to this church, would this ministry contract or expand?

It is your choice. Are you going to spend your money in a way that is pleasing to God? Have you been born again? Are you living with yourself in the center of your universe? Are you living with God in the center of your universe? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

It was a private discussion the world has been trying to understand for centuries. Jesus said, "You must be born again." In other words, God must be the center of your universe. Life distills down to a series of choices. The responsibility rests on you. Can anyone question your love for God? Please pray with me.