

*After the Storm: Do I Have to Choose?*

Matthew 7:12-20

All of this Lent, we have been immersed in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, probably the most important sermon he ever preached. We have just glossed over it, really—we could spend more weeks, and even months, mining it for meaning. There is a word in Hebrew: *Dayenu*—it means “it would have been enough”. And that is perhaps true of this one sermon. If this were all of Jesus' teachings that we were left to us, it would have been enough to change our lives. *Dayenu*.

We read this morning just a bit of four short stories that ended this sermon, stories that Jesus told in rapid-fire succession, each similar enough to carve deeper into the same space, each different enough to suggest that their lesson can be applied in many circumstances.

There are two gates, he said as he began the first story; they open onto two roads. One is broad and smooth, well-paved, easy to travel--like a highway. The other is narrow and rocky. It goes uphill like a mountain path. Not very many people choose this one, but the narrow path, the one that's hard to walk on, is the one that leads to life.

There are two different kinds of trees, he said. Both look good; all have green leaves and stand up tall. But one produces luscious fruit; the other something poisonous as a thistle. You have to wait for the right season to know, but then you'll see that only one of them produces something good to eat. It's the fruit that matters, not the shiny green leaves.

The same is true with people, he said. Credentials, and even good intentions, don't actually matter much. What matters is what you do with what you've heard and experienced; how you live.

People who listen to me—to any wisdom--fall into two camps, he said. Either they hear and do something in response, or they just let the words wash over them. Sometimes you can't tell the difference until the storms come in—as they always do. When rain and floodwaters come, when the wind is buffeting your house from all sides—then you will see which person has built their house on a solid foundation and which house is built on something that washes away like sand.

With each of these stories, Jesus framed a pair of images, a pair of choices. He seemed to be saying, you have to choose one way or another, one direction to set your face when other destinations are possible, one way of living your life in contrast to all the other choices out there. You don't just *have* to choose, he said; you *do* choose. Every day, conscious or not, we make choices about who we will be. Even when we think we have no choice, when we say “I'm between a rock and a hard place,” we choose which one we will lean against. We can't always make what we want happen; but we choose—even in unwanted circumstances—toward what is life-giving or what is not; toward healing or brokenness; toward hope or despair. We choose who we will be, even in the middle of circumstances we did not prefer and cannot control.

The power to choose is at the core of our humanity, said Victor Frankl, the Jewish philosopher whose thinking was shaped by his experience in the Nazi concentration camps. “Everything can be taken from

a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” Frankl chose love rather than to hate as the consequence of his experience. He could not defeat the hatred of the Nazis. But his choice kept their hatred from defeating him. What we choose changes *us*.

Maya Angelou was speaking in San Francisco once when she told a story about a time she had been here 10 or 15 years earlier, putting on a public television show about African art. Just before the show was supposed to go on, she got a call from a stranger who said that he had a collection of statues from Africa, and maybe she would like to use them for the show? She went and saw them, and they were perfect for what she was doing. She used them in the show, and she and the man who had lent them to her began a friendship. In fact, Maya Angelou got to be quite close to this man and his wife. They had dinner together several times before she went back to the east coast.

A few years later, she came back to the Bay Area for something, and she called this man, her friend, and said hello, it’s Maya Angelou. I’d love to pick up our friendship, and to see you again. The man said that was great, and as they talked on the phone, he began to tell her a little about what he had been doing. He had been in Europe, working with the problems of American troops who were stationed there. “How did it go?” she asked.

He said, “The black troops have a particularly hard time because they are black and there aren’t many blacks around. But our boys, also...”

She interrupted him. “What did you say?” she asked.

He said, “The black troops have a particularly difficult time for various reasons, but our boys also...”

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. She knew this man wasn’t hearing the import of his own words. And so she asked again, and they went through the same thing a third time.

All of a sudden, as she described it later, the man heard himself what he had said, and he said to her, “This is the most awful thing I have ever done. I can’t believe I said such a terrible thing to you, Maya Angelou, talking about ‘the black boys’ and then ‘our boys’.” She said, “No; this is why we have to talk to each other—because that’s just what racial prejudice is. It’s hidden. Whatever is said on the surface, underneath is that deep, ingrained sense of a difference between ‘black boys and our boys’.”

So they continued the conversation, and they agreed to get together. And then, over the next weeks, she tried many times to get hold of them, to see this man and his wife. Again and again, her calls weren’t answered. She left messages, and got nothing back. And finally the whole friendship just fizzled out, and years went by.

She told this story during a two-day conference she was speaking at. She told it at the end of the first day, in response to a question about where she still saw racism around her. And as she told the story, she got visibly upset. The next morning she came back to the podium first thing, and she said, “I’m sure you noticed that I was moved by what I told you yesterday about how I experience racism. But a remarkable thing happened as I was leaving the hall. A man in the audience stood up and said, ‘Here I am.’”

It was the man she had been talking about. And as she said this out loud, to the whole hall full of people, the man himself got up out of his seat—he was a small white Episcopal priest—and he walked up to the platform and threw his arms around that great big black woman, Maya Angelou, and they hugged one another and they wept.

The whole audience was silent with emotion. They were moved because they saw right in front of them all those barriers—race, fear, mistrust, misunderstanding, loneliness—all those barriers that confine all of us, and that are so hard to get past—being crossed over.<sup>i</sup>

That story is about the choices those two people made; the choices we all make, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. The white man chose to step out of the darkness where he sat—if not comfortably, then at least anonymously. Maya Angelou also chose—to forgive, to wrap her arms around someone who had hurt her, to keep trying to find a lost friend. They both chose—relationship over pride, over principle.

We cannot always control what will put us in a dark place. It might be illness, or our own shame, feeling hurt, a situation that feels to us terribly unfair. We often feel *un-powerful*--over other people, even our own lives. But we never lose the power to choose the direction we will set our eyes and our hearts—toward life or death, forgiveness or hostility, hope or pessimism. Toward the road that has become familiar and easy or toward a God who will just never leave well enough alone.

You choose the road you will walk on *before* you know what experiences it will bring you. That's what we do when we are baptized, or become a member of the church: we say, "I choose this direction for my life, and to walk toward it with this community of people." It's not always an easy choice; choosing one direction means leaving another. Sometimes it doesn't feel practical, or even possible. It has always seemed a little slippery. A 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic who must have known something about real life once said, "If you can't love God, then start by loving the people who love God." Every week I stand here and urge you to choose to follow the way of Jesus. Not because there's some line you must put your toe on to be acceptable to God, not so you can help me build a better church. But because I know this one to be a path—a choice—that can lead you to life, to healing, even to joy.

There is a prayer that speaks of the power of our choices.

What we choose changes us.  
Who we love transforms us.  
How we live reshapes us.  
So in all our choosing, O God, make us wise;  
In all our loving, O Christ, make us bold;  
In all our creating, O Spirit, give us courage;  
In all our living may we become whole.

From *Night Vigil* by Jan Richardson

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<sup>i</sup> This story was told by Frederick Buechner in a sermon entitled "A Moment of Grace", on *30 Good Minutes*, October 4, 1992.