

HARD CHOICES

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

I realized along time ago that in politics...and for anyone, I guess, the greatest temptation any speaker has is to overstate his or her case. I remember a story from my childhood in the Ozark hills about a temperance speaker who was lecturing on the evils of liquor.

"Who has the most money to spend?" he bellowed. "The saloon keeper! Who has the biggest house? The saloon keeper! Who has the finest furs and the most jewelry? The saloon keeper's wife! And who pays for all this? You do, my friends, you do!"

A few days later, a couple who had been in the audience met the eloquent battler of booze in the street and congratulated him on the wonderful speech.

"I'm pleased to see that you've given up drinking," the lecturer said.

"Well, not exactly," admitted the man. "We bought a saloon."
The speaker didn't realize he was presenting them with a choice.

Moses was delivering to the children of Israel the covenant he had received from God. There was no danger that he would overstate his case. He had no choice but to deliver a hard message. The stakes were high. The very survival of his people was at stake. In the midst of Moses' oration we find these critical words: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death . . . therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live." (v19)

Moses was saying that a time of decision was at hand. The people of Israel could no longer walk on both sides of the fence. They must make a choice.

YOU AND I ARE CONTINUALLY MAKING CHOICES, ARE WE NOT?
Some of them are very minor choices. Think of all the choices you made getting ready for church this morning--which tie? which blouse? Do I shave? etc.

Some choices are really not choices at all. I'm sure those of you who are frequent fliers will undoubtedly sympathize with my experience. I was flying on an unnamed airline where the lead steward was unusually candid. It was really quite refreshing, honestly, as he simply would say things that we all knew. Anyway, he announced the luncheon choices—chicken Marengo, beef burritos, or fruit salad. After announcing these choices the flight attendant added this useful piece of advice: "If you do not get your first choice, please do not be distressed, as all our entrees taste very much the same." Some choices are no choice at all.

In rural Arizona, a man went to see the Hopi Indians perform ceremonial dances. It was a long lonely drive to the reservation across secluded desert terrain, and the last 65 miles of it was over very rough roads. Late afternoon, after the dances, the man returned to his car only to discover he had a flat tire. To make matters worse, he had no spare in his trunk. But he remembered seeing a lone service station about 5 miles back down the road. After getting a ride to the service station, he found the elderly proprietor sitting in a chair drinking a soda. The stranded man asked, "Excuse me, sir, but do you fix flats?" The proprietor said, "Yep." So the man asked, "How much do you charge?" The proprietor replied, "What difference does it make?" Obviously the man was in no position to bargain.

Some choices are an illusion. You really have no choice or the choice has little impact. Then, of course, there are those life-changing choices. Like going to college, choosing a profession, choosing a mate.

It's been quite a few years ago that the newspapers carried the obituary of Group Capt. Peter Townsend, a dashing World War II fighter pilot. Some of you are old enough to recognize that name. It was he who loved and lost Princess Margaret and then went into more than 30 years of self-imposed exile from Great Britain. He was 80 when he died.

Capt. Townsend left Britain after Margaret, bowing to a disapproving establishment, told the nation October 31, 1955, she had decided not to marry Townsend because he was divorced. The romance between Capt. Townsend and the young princess, 16 years his junior, became public in 1953. It was a year after his divorce and the year Elizabeth was crowned monarch and temporal head of the Church of England, which frowns on divorce. Amid a furor which reverberated through Britain and its Commonwealth of former colonies, the much-decorated war ace was banished from the palace on the advice of Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill to a diplomatic post here in Brussels. But the romance survived until 1955 when Margaret, then age 25 and third in line to the throne, made her final decision.

"She could have married me," Capt. Townsend wrote in his 1978 autobiography, only if she had been prepared to give up everything--her position, her prestige, her privy purse. I simply hadn't the weight, I knew it, to counterbalance all she would have lost."

Choices, choices, choices--so many choices. We may never have to choose between true love and a throne, but we still have choices.

OF COURSE THE SAD THING IS THAT FOR BETTER OR WORSE WE HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE CHOICES WE MAKE. That was why Moses' task was so critical. Much was at stake. Israel would have to live with the consequences of

their decision. Make the right choice and they would prosper. Make the wrong choice and they would perish.

One of the marks of maturity is the discovery that the choices we make have consequences. If we choose rightly, we reap rewards. If we choose wrongly, we sometimes pay a steep price.

I had a good laugh at a story in the newspapers sometime back about a teacher who found a novel way to make students pay for their transgressions. Troublemakers at Riverside-Brookfield High in suburban Chicago are being forced to serve after-school sentences in the Frank Sinatra Detention Club. There, for 30 minutes, they must sit utterly still--no talking, no homework, no snoozing--and listen to Ol'Blue Eyes croon songs from a by-gone era. "The kids hate it. They're miserable," reports teacher Bruce Janu, a Sinatra fan who devised the club as a way to make detention more fun for him, less so for the kids. "It just got to where I couldn't stand it," said one senior. "It was SO BORING." Janu isn't totally heartless though. He lets students sing along if they want--but nobody does.

It is important for young people to learn at an early age that choices have consequences. In terms of their later success, it is one of the most important lessons that they will learn. Adults who are continually bailing their children out when they make mistakes are cheating their children of one of life's most important lessons: we reap what we sow. Someone has put it this way. There are two major pains in life: the pain of discipline and the pain of regret. Think about that for a moment: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret.

Some time back I read an interview with actress Martha Scott. When asked about the great amount of energy it takes to rehearse and then act, she said, "It's . . . exhausting. It takes enormous energy and stamina, much more than meets the eye." Scott once asked actress Lucille Ball how she could work 13 hours a day as a performer in television and also function as a producer behind the scenes. Lucy said, "Get plenty of rest. Save your energy. Whenever you can sit, sit. Don't spread yourself thin with social activity." Scott said it was a professional, real-life extension of something she'd first heard as a college girl acting in school plays. Her theater arts director wouldn't even let her go to a football game. Their school was very big on football, but when she mentioned going to the game, the director really chewed her out. He said, "If you're serious about acting, you'd better know it's like taking the veil in church. You give up other pleasures. You can't use your vocal chords at a football game Saturday afternoon and expect to have a speaking voice Saturday night on the stage." In effect, life is a matter of choices on the road to a goal.

Choices. We have to make choices. The law of sowing and reaping has not been repealed. You sow a good life--a life of integrity, of kindness, of paying

attention to your relationships with God and with your neighbor, of taking care of your body, mind and soul--and you will reap a good life of lasting friendships, better than average health, and a feeling of deep satisfaction within. Try to take short-cuts, be a cheater, a slacker, a ne'er-do-well and eventually life will find you out. As the saying goes, time heals all wounds and wounds all heels. The choice is ours. I hope I don't sound too preachy. Forget that I am a pastor. Any sound psychologist would say the same to you; any successful business leader, any competent doctor. You don't have to live very long to discover this is the way life works. The sooner you learn to make good choices, the sooner you will find lasting happiness.

And this brings us to the last thing we need to say: **GOD'S WILL IS THAT WE MAKE CHOICES THAT WILL LEAD TO LIFE.** God says to the people through Moses: "I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live."

That was a lesson that Mel Trotter had to learn the hard way. For much of his life Trotter was a hopeless alcoholic. He came home after one ten-day drinking spree to find his baby dead in his wife's arms. "I've killed my son," he cried. "I'll never touch another drop." But two hours after his baby's funeral, Mel Trotter staggered home--drunk again. He had taken the little white shoes off his baby in the coffin and pawned them for money to buy drink. In utter despair he headed along a Chicago street for Lake Michigan. But on the way the strong arm of Harry Monroe, Superintendent of Pacific Garden Mission, pulled him inside a hall where the Gospel was being preached. That night suicidal Mel Trotter heard that there was a hope in Christ. He became a Christian and for the next 40 years served as superintendent of a rescue mission in Grand Rapids, Michigan. From this base he started 60 other gospel missions in U.S. cities, all designed to reach down-and-outers for Christ. He counseled thousands of would-be suicides, putting them on the road to happiness and Heaven. Mel Trotter chose to turn from death to life.

Our situation is not apt to be as desperate as Mel Trotter's but still there are choices you and I make every day that determine the quality of our lives and the quality of our relationships. God's will for each of us is to make choices that lead to abundant life.

It's like an incident that Benjamin Franklin related in his autobiography. An English clergyman was once ordered to read a special proclamation issued by King Charles I. After a period in which the country had observed strict blue laws, the king issued a decree urging to people to return to participating in sports on Sunday.

Most church leaders refused to read the edict. But to one congregation's amazement, their minister read the king's decree. But he followed the pronouncement with these words, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." And he added,

"Brethren, I have laid before you the commandment of your king and the commandment of your God. I leave it to you to judge which of the two ought to be observed."

As your pastor I would not presume to make your choices for you. But as not only your pastor, but also your friend, I would remind you that there are destructive choices and there are constructive choices. There are choices that will make you and those who love you stronger and there are choices that will wreck your life and theirs. All of tomorrow hinges on the choices you and I make. Let us, therefore, choose life.