

Leaving a Legacy
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Joshua 24:14-27, Matthew 4:8-10

Decisions, choices. Life is full of them. Some say we have lots of freedom to choose and that we should relish that freedom. Yet others observe that such freedom only gets us into deeper trouble, since sometimes we fail to choose wisely, and make the wrong decisions. Yet others would say that we don't really have any choices at all, because someone else has power to choose for us. Still others would say that by remaining indecisive is a valid choice.

I'm reminded of a scene in the 1995 movie "Dangerous Minds" starring Michelle Pfeiffer. The movie is based on a true story about high school teacher LouAnne Johnson who is trying to make a difference in the lives of troubled inner-city students.

In one scene, while LouAnne is in front of the class teaching, the students are upset with her because they felt she "ratted" on three of them for fighting. LouAnne asks them if they want to discuss the issue. There is no response. Fully calm and composed, she tells them if they feel so strongly about it, they should leave the classroom. No one is forcing them to be there. They can stay or leave.

That's when one of the students objects and tells her they don't have a choice, saying *"If we leave, we don't get to graduate. If we stay, we have to put up with you."*

LouAnne tells the student that's a choice—not one they may like, but it's still a choice.

Another student angrily objects and says, *"Man, you don't understand nothing. You don't come from where we live. You're not bussed here. You come and live in my neighborhood for one week, and then you come and tell me if you have a choice."*

LouAnne, with a slight tinge of anger, firmly replies, *"There are a lot of people who live in your neighborhood who choose not to get on that bus. What do they choose to do? They choose to go out and sell drugs. They choose to go out and kill people. They choose to do a lot of other things. But they choose not to get on that bus. The people who choose to get on that bus, which are you, are the people who are saying, 'I will not carry myself*

down to die; when I go to my grave, my head will be high.' That is a choice." Then in a slightly louder and angrier tone, she says, *"There are no victims in this classroom!"*

The camera cuts away to show one student seriously considering her words.

Another student says, *"Why do you care anyway? You're just here for the money."*

LouAnne quickly responds, *"Because I make a choice to care, and honey, the money ain't that good."*¹

LouAnne in this movie is much like Joshua, who says: *"as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."* As people of faith, we are called upon to be loyal to our LORD even when the majority all around us are turning away and relying on other gods.

Joshua had grown old, under his faithful and wise leadership, the Israelite tribes have entered and settled into the Promised Land. For 24 years, there has been some semblance of normalcy as each tribe put down roots. Although they had captured the land, the inhabitants (and their Gods) never really disappeared.

As God's faithful servant, Joshua knew there were dangers in settling down. Over time, the people could become indifferent towards their God and their commitments. Peace and prosperity have a way of tempting us to believe that our success is all our doing.

Unless challenged, the Israelites could put their eggs in multiple baskets by worshipping the various gods of Canaan, some of whom required dangerous practices like child sacrifice or temple prostitution. Their loyalties could easily be divided, until they lost their sense of identity and unity as God's People altogether.

This retirement speech is Joshua's final chance to rally his people so that hopefully there will be a legacy that will continue after he dies. He calls them all together in one place, Shechem, his purpose is to renew the covenant between God and the Israelite tribes and reinforce their identity and unity. In a very solemn speech, Joshua reminds the Israelite tribes of how God had called Abraham away from the worship of many gods in the land of his birth to follow the One God who cared for them in the wilderness and eventually led them to the peace they now enjoy.

¹ Craig Brian Larson & Lori Quicke, Editors, *More Movie-Based Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching: 101 Clips to Show or Tell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan & Christianity Today International, 2004), pp. 30-31.

The people, in response, do remember the LORD their God, and recite their salvation history. They remember how God had delivered and protected and provided for them. Then they promise, answering Joshua, that *"Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."*

Joshua, to reinforce their commitment further, reminds them of the tragic consequences of serving other gods, that failing to be loyal has dire consequences. Once again the Israelites respond that they would indeed serve the LORD. Again and again, Joshua makes them swear to put away their competing Gods. Then he completes a covenant renewal ceremony by drawing up a statute and ordinance for his people and placing a large boulder there for them to see, touch and remember.

In our faith and life journey, we too can run into dangers and temptations. There are literally millions of false gods today that we can divide our loyalties on. We, like Joshua and the Israelites of old need to remember where we've been, where we are now, and where we're going.

Jesus makes that quite clear for us in the gospels. He tells us that we, like the Israelites, have been delivered, protected, and provided for. We, like the Israelites, have been and still are chosen by God. We have been called, loved, and forgiven. We have been assured that Jesus is still with us always.

But I wonder sometimes if we take that too much for granted? How do we divide our commitments and our loyalties? I'm not calling us to perfection; it's not about that. It's about choosing, day in and day out, to live the values we claim. There are so many false Gods that surround us, trying to divide us and turn us from following Jesus' path.

We are what we do, and what we do becomes our legacy. James Baldwin wrote: *"A country is only as good... only as strong as the people who make it up and the country turns into what the people want it to become... I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands. We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over."*

As seekers on the way of Jesus, we are strangers in a strange land. And when we step onto that road to risk the cross in the name of righteous love, we set aside our secular citizenship in favor of beloved kinship. And that is a choice we have to make with each step, each breath of our day, even with the words we say and the dollars we spend.

Setting aside the violence and the historical inaccuracies of Joshua, this story remains alive to us in its reminder of humanity's long and voluntary relationship with God. More times than scripture can name, people of faith

have chosen to be in relationship with holiness, despite competing options and pressures. People of faith have given freely again and again to enact healing and nurturing ministries that reach out with the love of Christ.

Maybe that's why we have to recite our MCC covenant in worship each Sunday, because this is an alien culture and our own hearts are sorely tested all the days in between.

God's will is to BE in covenant with humanity.
Despite our tendency to practice conquest,
and fabricate triumphal tales,
and abuse God's name for our own goals.

In the book, Renovate or Die², Bob Farr describes a problem that the church brought on itself during the 20th century. Farr calls it "playing church." Instead of raising up committed followers of Jesus Christ whose deep faith offers healing and hope to others, the church has cultivated "consumer Christians," people who think that holding an intellectual belief in Jesus and showing up occasionally for worship is all that being a Christian requires.

For Consumer Christians, faith is a transaction – they go to church to feel better about themselves, so choosing a faith community is more about meeting their own needs than serving their Lord. So the church naturally markets itself to these consumers, and never helps them develop into faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Frankly, it's easier to work at being appealing than it is to help people along the path to discipleship. Playing church is easier than being church. Showing up isn't quite the same as allowing Christ to transform us from the inside, to change our priorities and ways of thinking so that Jesus' love is at the very center of everything we do or say... in person, or on social media.

You know God's history in your life. You know how God works in this community. Our faith is no joke. Who will you and your household serve? Make a choice. God already has, and it is each of us.

Christ calls us to go all in, to worship only God, and to stop making excuses for our half-heartedness. Will we follow the tendency of the world around us, and only think about God when we are in hot water? Will we busy ourselves "playing church," and hope that's good enough? Or are we ready to re-commit ourselves fully to being devoted followers of Jesus Christ, with all the sacrifice that path entails? Amen.

² <https://www.amazon.com/Renovate-Die-Focus-Church-Mission/dp/1426715862>