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Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, John 6:56-69
Choose This Day!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶⁶After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. (John 6:66, RSV)

For a preacher, this is a sorrowful thing. It seems that the longer Jesus preached that day, the worse things got. At the start of the chapter, Jesus had a congregation of five thousand people. He fed them with five barley loaves and two small fish. By the end of the chapter, he has only his Twelve – eleven, really, because one of the Twelve is a traitor!

In our First Lesson, from Joshua 24, Joshua asks the people of Israel to make a choice:

¹⁵And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve... (Joshua 24:15, RSV)

So it is when it comes to Jesus: in the end, you must make a choice. There you stand, mending your nets by the seashore. Jesus comes along and bids you follow him. Either you follow or you do not. It is your choice and your bear responsibility before God for your choice. And please mark this: If you follow, then you place yourself into a situation in which you come to learn more and more about Jesus, you gain a chance to come to faith in him, and in time, you gain a cross as you follow him — that is, difficulties come your way as you stick close to Jesus.

On the other hand, if you walk away from him, do not think you are walking away free and easy and unencumbered. The truth is, you might gain the whole world, but lose your soul in the process. And you will but exchange the holy cross of Christ for the crushing weight of life without him, without your Savior!

If you do choose to walk with Jesus, it is a choice that will doubtless need to be renewed from time to time. Here you are, walking with Jesus for a good long stretch. But now he bids you get out of your boat and walk on the water. He bids you do something that exceeds your logic and sense of rationality – that might even seem immoral to you. Yet he bids you get out of your boat. You face a choice. Either you will walk with him, or you will walk away.

Or here you sit in the courtyard, as near to poor Jesus as seems prudent. But now a maid appears, looks intently at you, and claims that you know this Jesus:

But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, This man was also with him. (Luke 22:56, KJV)

You face a choice. You've been true to Jesus for a good long time, you've done the best you could to follow him, but today is a new day, and your faithfulness to your Lord is being pressed anew. Either you stick with Jesus or you walk away. Alas, in the courtyard scene, Peter walks away:

And he denied him, saying, Woman, I know him not. (Luke 22:57, KJV)

Plenty of people walk away from Jesus. That is the lesson of this Sunday's Gospel story. St. John once said that Jesus came to his own people, but they would not accept him:

He came unto his own, and his own received him not. (John 1:11, KJV)

Now, in this morning's story, Jesus seems grief-struck and utterly discouraged over the people leaving him behind. He turns to his Twelve and asks them whether they will abandon him too:

⁶⁷Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" (John 6:67, RSV)

Peter, bless him, gives an encouraging answer – an answer that we sometimes sing in the liturgy (the Alleluia Verse):

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life... (John 6:68, RSV)

With these words, Peter reveals that Jesus has won his heart. If those who walked away from Jesus were to examine Peter, test him on his theology, quiz him on his sense of logic and rationality and whether he is up-to-date on current moral thinking, he might have failed. But no matter: he has lost his heart to Jesus and he cannot walk away from his Master. Neither can the other disciples -- again, except for the traitor. Still, that is a pretty small crowd. Our Lord's congregation has collapsed from five thousand to eleven.¹

¹ Donald Juel, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 519

This is a sermon about choice. It is about making a decision for Jesus. *Or* against him. Let's begin with those who turn away.

Among the multitudes who followed Jesus for a while, but then turned away, I bet there were some very good people. Some people in the departing crowd might have been rascals, with no real interest in God and piety, yet many more might have been impressive people. Let me give you two examples. I am thinking of the Rich Young Man, for one example, and of the Seventy – the group of disciples Jesus had sent on a preaching and healing mission in his name.

THE RICH YOUNG MAN

Let us think first of the Rich Young Man.² There is something about Jesus that tugs on the heart of this young man. They are quite a pair, quite a contrast. The young man has many possessions, while Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. The young man is a ruler (Luke 18:18) – a man of office and standing. Jesus is a wandering preacher, with no ecclesiastical or governmental authority. But this young man seems to sense that questions of eternity can be entrusted to this penniless preacher, and so he comes to Jesus asking about eternal life. The rich young man has found his man. He has found the very Bread of Life. Yet in the end, he walks away from Jesus. He counts the cost too high, and so he sorrowfully walks away.

Now I picture him in that crowd at the end of John 6 who turn and walk away from Jesus. I hope he continues to be a good man. I hope he continues to obey the holy commandments of God. Turning away from Jesus does not mean that he should surrender his integrity and dive headlong into sin. He walks away from Jesus sorrowfully, but I hope he continues to live his good life. Our world *needs* him to live his good life. Still, he walks away sorrowfully because he senses the truth: the golden moment has arrived in his life, and he has failed. He had come to this penniless preacher because he wanted to follow him, but in the end, he could not bring himself to do so. He walks away. May the good Lord be with him and watch over him. But the sad thing is that this Rich Young Man is not *with* Jesus. He should be, but he is not. Jesus in his capacity as God almighty might tenderly watch over him henceforth for the remainder of his days. Jesus might be his true Protector during the time left to him. But as for the man himself, he does not walk with the One who walks with him. Though he is rich, he has made himself poor. He has impoverished his life in that he has walked away from the One who is the Bread of Life. He has walked away from the One is the inexhaustible source of life and to whom all things belong, even the cattle on a thousand hills. The Rich Young Man has preserved his wealth, but he has lost the chance to be a disciple of this world's true Master, and in the end, he has jeopardized everything, including his wealth! Troubles, temptation, misery, and death stare at him and approach him

² Matthew 19:16-22, and parallels.

day by day, but he has separated himself from his Good Shepherd and from the Great Physician of body and soul. I am a pastor. I must venture to say that he made a mistake. I do not want you or me to make that mistake!

THE SEVENTY

Think too of the seventy disciples Jesus sent on a preaching and healing mission. We read about that in Luke 10. They accomplished wonders in the name of Jesus. He sent them forth fairly empty-handed, urging them to accept whatever charity was offered to them, and to preach and to heal people. They return to Jesus triumphant:

And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. (Luke 10:17, KJV)

Yet now, these Seventy seem to be part of that vast crowd who walk away. All Jesus can do is turn to his remaining Twelve disciples and ask them whether they mean to abandon him too.

This matter of the Seventy should serve as a warning to those of us who have tried to walk with Jesus, might have gained positions of leadership and responsibility in the church, might even have done wonders in the name of the Lord. Yet, in the end, the Seventy have given up on Jesus. The apostolic warning rings true for each of us, whether we are newcomers to the walk with Jesus or veterans in that walk:

Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12, RSV)

Again, I picture the Seventy as part of that vast crowd who turn away from Jesus at the end of our text. They are Seventy among five thousand. They have done good in this world in the past, and I hope they will do good in the future. They have labored hard and honestly in the past, and I hope they will labor hard and honestly in the future. Life goes on. The universe still bids them onwards to holiness of life. It is just that, I am a pastor. And I cannot help but believe that they made a mistake in walking away from Jesus. Rationality, science, even their modern notions of morality might have led them away from Jesus, but I fear they made a mistake. It can never be right to forsake the true Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:25).

THOSE WHO REMAIN

Now, let end by shifting the focus from the multitudes who walked away from Jesus to the few who remained. Are they glad they did? Well, *now*, in the Communion of Saints, I am sure they are glad that they remained. Think of them

sitting quietly and invisibly in Immanuel's pews – your holy neighbors here in church. They are bound to be here because they are with Jesus, and Jesus has promised to be wherever two or three are gathered together in his name. Imagine, then, that we could speak with Peter or James or John or Matthew the tax collector. Imagine that we could ask their estimate of things. Are they glad that they walked with Jesus? Many of them endured martyrdom. Do they regret a thing? I am sure that they regret nothing, except that they did not walk even closer to Jesus.

The five thousand turned and walked away. That did not mean that things were easy for the few who remained with Jesus. They still hungered and thirsted. They still suffered hardships and loneliness. They still faced temptations and the chance to let Jesus down. And they did! Yet, they set the great model for us of getting back up when they fall and renewing the walk with Jesus – the very Bread of Life.

Joshua sets the eternal choice before us:

...choose this day whom you will serve... (Joshua 24:15,
RSV)

We must serve someone. It cannot be that we escape the yoke. The real question is simply whether we bear the yoke of Him who is gentle and lowly, whose burden is light, and who will give salvation for our souls, or whether we shall bear the burdens of going on without him.

Choose life! When Moses was an old man, preaching his final sermon, that was his farewell appeal to this people:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I
have set before you life and death, blessing and curse;
therefore choose life... (Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

Amen! Let us choose life, even Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the way, the truth, and the life for us, and to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.