

Here in America, it could be said one of the things we value most is the ability to choose. It is a commonly held assumption that choice is an act of individual freedom and expression. But social scientists who study choice and our human capacity to make healthy choices point out this assumption is false. Many times, what we think is a choice is really picking from different types of the same thing, like different kinds of noodles, soda, shirts, etc. in both brick-and-mortar stores and online, which is not the same thing as choosing. Choice is not consumerism, it is a practice, a discipline.

Social scientists describe choosing as a communal act, something that not only impacts the individual who made the choice, but the people and community around them, and possibly the world. When we make a choice, we will have to live with the consequences of the choice, good or bad. Our choices and their consequences can impact others. At its best, choice is about possibilities, making life better for all; at its worst, we don't always know how to choose.

The theme of making choices runs through all our readings this morning. Starting with our first reading from Deuteronomy, that comes at a pivotal moment in the lives of the Israelites when they came to the end of their long 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Moses had led them to the Promised Land and was about to transition out of leadership. Moses had done what he said he was going to do. Now the people were going into a new phase of life, no longer nomads, they had to learn how to live in one place as part of a larger community. For this transition they needed a different kind of leader and they needed to be reminded God freed them from slavery under Egypt so they could use the freedom God gave them to choose to follow God. This would not be easy in a new culture. It would be tempting to forget God so they might fit in and do whatever everyone else does. Today's first reading is only part of a long speech Moses gave his followers that warned this choice would not go well for them. As God's people, they are asked to choose as God wants them to choose, to follow the 10 Commandments about loving God and loving their neighbor so the people they were going to be living with might learn about and come to know God. That is the choice, Moses said, that is life.

Moses did not mean life in the biological sense of eating, breathing, and reproducing. Moses meant life in the theological sense, being part of God's creation and reflecting God's image to the world.

This is the same choice Paul was putting before his friend and partner in ministry Philemon in the letter he wrote that was our second reading this morning. Paul was asking Philemon to choose life by liberating Onesimus from the debt that held him in slavery, so that both Philemon and Onesimus could grow closer to God and each other.

This brings us to the Gospel lesson today where Jesus was also talking about making choices, although in a more dramatic way. Today's Gospel opens with Jesus saying no one can be a disciple without hating their family. This can be shocking, especially for those of us who love our families and might also make us point back to the 10 Commandments that include honoring parents and wonder about Jesus possibly contradicting a commandment. Then Jesus went on to tell two parables about choices: no one chooses to build a large building without enough resources. No one chooses to go to war without some strategy. In both cases, choices are made first by taking some information into account and spending time considering the consequences.

These examples can help us better understand what Jesus meant when he spoke about hating family. The word translated "hate" in its original Greek does not mean estrangement like it does in our modern culture. The same word could also be translated: "not choose".

It is possible Jesus was talking about how those who follow him are to make choices. Following Jesus means letting Jesus influence how we make choices. Making choices like Jesus wants us to mean factoring love into our choices like the builder factors in resources and the king factors in strategy.

A quick example: after I was ordained a priest my life changed. Those changes were the result of the choice I made to answer God's call to the priesthood. One of the biggest changes was how I observed holidays with my family. Before I was ordained, my family got together the evening on Christmas Day to open presents and have dinner. However, after two church services on Christmas Eve, one on Christmas morning and visiting shut ins who requested Holy Communion on Christmas Day, there was no way I had the energy to drive two hours to my parents' house. Nor did I have the space to host my family at my small apartment.

At first this change was uncomfortable, like any time you mess with tradition. It was also an opportunity for my family and I to choose to adapt to the change, which meant making different choices about how we would celebrate Christmas as a family. One option was my parents could continue to celebrate the family Christmas on the same day, but without me. Another option was to bring the family together on a different day for presents and a meal. To help make this decision my family turned to some traditional religious information. They know Christmas is a season that lasts twelve days starting on December 25. They also know some Christians celebrate with presents and meals on the twelfth day of Christmas instead on Christmas Day. My parents realized this meant they didn't have to celebrate Christmas on December 25; they were free to celebrate it on any of the twelve days and still be faithful to tradition. Something else that factored into the decision was how my family loves each other. It is more important to be together instead of having the dinner and presents on a specific day.

That is how my family made the choice to change when they celebrated the family Christmas. It was a break with tradition, but at the same time it was continuing the tradition of gathering as a family to enjoy the holiday. The decision-making process my family used reflects the love of God in Christ.

It is the same process Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Putting Jesus first didn't mean storming off when the family Christmas celebration no longer worked out the way it had in the past, it meant loving my family because I love Jesus (as does my family) and together persevering through some discomfort because we choose to love each other.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel are not that different from those of social scientists who talk about the art of choosing. We all have choices to make and how we make our choices can say a lot about who we are, what we value, and even form our lives. Like what Moses said to the Israelites in our first reading, when we factor in loving God and loving our neighbors when we make our choices, we are embodying God's love in the world. This might mean we will have less choices overall, because not all choices are about loving God and caring for each other, and that can be a good thing.

Fewer choices do not mean fewer opportunities to make ourselves or the world better. In fact, sometimes fewer choices can be more life giving than a plethora of choices. Here is a brief example:

When Sheena Iyengar was a little girl, she dreamed of becoming a pilot. Her parents were immigrants from India who chose to come to the United States because they had big dreams. Growing up in New York City, Sheena was constantly told she could be whatever she wanted when she grew up. However, before she started elementary school, she was diagnosed with a rare disease that would cause her to lose her sight. There was no fixing it, no medicine, no miracle surgery. There was only acceptance. Which took a while. By the time she was in second grade, Sheena had lost most of her ability to see. When her teacher asked the class what they wanted to be when they grew up, Sheena eagerly said she wanted to be a pilot. The class laughed, and the teacher calmly dismissed her. That's when Sheena realized her dream would never come true. Without eyesight, she could not be a pilot.

While she could have despaired at this reality, Sheena instead found hope, strength, and resilience by focusing on what she could still choose to be when she grew up. Most teachers assumed she would go on permanent disability. However, a music teacher gave her a clarinet and taught her to play. Today she says there was no way she'd become a musician because she lacked talent. But what her music teacher did was help others recognize Sheena had more choices than disability. And Sheena realized she needed to make informed choices because whatever she chose, she would have to work harder than others to get past the gatekeepers and discrimination she would experience as a blind Indian American woman.

After graduating from several prestigious universities, today she is Dr. Sheena Iyengar, a professor at Columbia University, working in both Business Management and Psychology. Her life experiences influenced her to study how people make choices, and her first book *The Art of Choosing* has helped people in business, government, and in personal lives make choices that will make the world a better place. Dr. Iyengar recognizes that any life is a balance of adapting to things we do not choose – like losing her sight, or for others aging, job loss, or living in the time of a pandemic - by focusing on the choices we can make instead of obsessing over what is lost.

Long before there was a book on the topic, God made humans in God's image, giving us free will, and the freedom to choose. These days those words can get tangled up in politics and personal preferences, but the reason God gave us free will is because choices really do have possibility for creating healthy relationships, communities, and people. Sometimes we forget the reason we have

choices, and don't always choose well. Sometimes we can get overwhelmed by too many choices, and some people can become so overwhelmed they can't or won't choose. But even so, we have the choice to forgive ourselves and others and choose again. We might not always know how to choose, but when we remember the practice of making choices can also be a practice of love, one that deepens our relationship with God and our neighbors, it can help us view our choices differently and help us choose the life God dreamed for the world and for us.