

AUGUST 26TH, TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b Ephesians 5:21-32 John 6:60-69

For many of us, our faith has consisted in very few choices. Brought up Catholic, we've simply stayed in that configuration of beliefs our whole life. We've never experienced a compelling reason to change anything. Yet the authors of today's Joshua and John readings presume there are times when we're forced to choose between at least two alternative ways of living that faith.

The author of Joshua presents his readers with the basic choice of the Hebrew Scriptures: do we follow "pagan gods," or imitate Joshua and his family, opting to make Yahweh our personal God, and relinquish allegiance to any other gods or goddesses? We who grew up after the sixth century BCE have only one God to worry about. But those, like Joshua, who lived before Deutero-Isaiah's ministry, had hundreds of divine beings from which to choose. For them, biblical faith was much more complicated than just being a "believer" or an atheist.

John's Christian community is also faced with a choice. The late Raymond Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* meticulously outlines the alternatives. They spring from the distinction between "low and high Christology." The former looks at the biblical Jesus from his human characteristics, the latter, his divine. If one decides to preach on Jesus' humanity, one normally goes to Mark, Matthew and Luke, low Christology evangelists. Those who preach on his divinity usually turn to John, a high Christology proponent.

John's chapter 6 clearly paints a divine, high Christology picture of Jesus. One with God, he offers an everlasting food and drink that guarantees eternal life. His message actually is "Spirit and life." No wonder some "old time" Christians found all this new stuff hard to accept. They simply could "no longer accompany" that kind of Jesus.

Looking at our biblical writings historically, we frequently find ourselves in the middle of an evolving faith, a constantly moving experience. We not only must know what was said, but when, or in what order it was said. Lots of decisions were involved in forming the Scriptures we have today. The historical Jesus, for instance, decided at one point to reject this-life-only theology of most of his theological predecessors and accept the novel eternal-life theology of his fellow Pharisees. The Sadducees he encountered during his ministry refused to make that jump. They argued that believing in a heaven simply created too many complications, exemplified by multiple marriages.

That's where our Ephesians pericope comes in. Whether we like it or not, it forces us to make a decision. Do we follow this Pauline disciple's marriage theology, or go beyond it? We've already done this with Paul's theology on slavery. ("Slaves be obedient to your masters.") No one today would tolerate slavery just because of the Apostle's limited reflection on the subject. In the same way, should modern women be "subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord" just because the author of Ephesians said to do so 2,000 years ago? We could employ other biblical quotes to challenge that statement. E.g., our Genesis 1 author contends both men and women are made in the image and likeness of Yahweh; a theology in which there appears to be no marital subordination.

As I mentioned above, Sadducees wanted to live a "simple" life. That's one of the reasons they rejected belief in an afterlife. Do some Christians reject marital equality today just because they also long to live a simple life? Choices can bring complications. Yet in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures we surface a God who has given us free will. Perhaps the more we use that will, the more we actually become like the God we're trying to imitate, a very complicated being.

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SEPTEMBER 2ND, 2018: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Vatican II reforms opened my eyes to people's confusion over what are God laws, and what are human laws. Having been brought up in a church which prided itself on never changing, a lot of people – surprisingly more middle age than old - had huge problems when the Council bishops started modifying some of our teachings and regulations. Many of us thought whatever we did and believed came directly from God.

One of the main jobs of reformers – like Jesus of Nazareth – is to remind us what exactly in our faith is from God and what is from humans. It's natural and easy to mix the two.

Before we start casting stones at the Pharisees and scribes in today's gospel pericope, I remind you of a late-1960s national survey of Catholics. The questioners asked just one question: "Is it more important to give up meat on Friday or to love your neighbor?" Surprisingly, a majority answered, "Give up meat on Friday." We obviously learned our catechisms well. But we made little distinction between God's law and church law. In this case, a changeable human regulation trumped God's most basic command.

The Deuteronomy author provides us with the best reason for keeping God's laws: life. Though this particular writer knows nothing of an afterlife, he or she is certain that keepers of Yahweh's statutes and decrees will have a better quality of life right here and now than those who disregard those regulations. That's why we should never grumble about having to follow religious laws. We should be grateful for the life we experience by keeping them.

Cutting through the red tape that befuddles many of the faithful about which laws to keep and which to ignore, the author of James tells his community to just zero in on ". . . caring for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Above all, "Be doers of the word and not hearers only . . ." Yet, as innocent as it sounds, "keeping oneself unstained" can become complicated.

It would appear the risen, not the historical Jesus speaks in today's gospel pericope. Were it the historical Jesus, Paul's frequent conflicts with "Judaizers" wouldn't make sense. He'd win every argument against his conservative, law-abiding Christians by just quoting this passage.

The triggering device for this specific teaching of Jesus springs from non-Jews becoming Christians. As long as everyone who accepts the faith of Jesus is a Jew, this question never arises. As Jews, all early first Christian century Jews followed the 713 laws of Moses.

The first Gentile convert creates a problem. Does he or she have to adhere to those Mosaic regulations, especially the dietary rules? Paul's letters are where the question is hashed out, not the gospels. By the time Mark writes – the early 70s – the issue is fairly well settled. His Jesus can proclaim, "Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person." Yet the question that prompted this passage still remains: what does God actually want us to do; and what are simply human regulations?

Perhaps the best way to settle this question is to return to Deuteronomy. What laws bring life?

During the 50th anniversary year of *Humanae Vitae*, this is still the criterion. But our definition of life is always evolving. We no longer limit it to just physical life. The deeper we delve into life, the more complicated is our definition. Of course, I presume we experience a much more meaningful life when we employ our God-given consciences to solve birth control questions than when we just methodically follow human regulations. Proof that God's laws aren't always simple to surface or easy to carry out.

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