

It was fifteen years ago in the summer of 1994 when I was here in Middletown and preached on these readings. I don't expect anyone who heard the 1994 sermon to have such a vivid memory of my words then that it will be a problem if I happen to repeat myself.

With the readings that we have today we could call this "Decision Sunday." Since 1950 the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has had a weekly radio program called "The Hour of Decision." Our Old Testament reading from the Book of Joshua and our Gospel from John 6 present us with two "hours of decision."

Under the leadership of Joshua the children of Israel had conquered a considerable portion of the land of Palestine. Many native Canaanite towns and

cities remained, it is true, but the Israelites had called an end to their war of conquest. Now was the time to lay the groundwork, to set the terms of their inhabiting the Promised Land. Just before he dies at the end of the chapter, Joshua calls together all the tribes of Israel, delivers his Farewell Speech in chapter 23, and then in chapter 24, at the holy site of Shechem (modern-day Nablus in the West Bank), he reminds the assembled people of the history of all that God had done for them, starting with Abraham, going through the Exodus from Egypt under Moses, the years in the wilderness, and then how God enabled them to defeat the inhabitants of Canaan and get land there for themselves where they could settle down.

After reciting all that God had done for them, Joshua asks the people to commit themselves to worship and obey the God who had done so much for them. The catch is, they will not be allowed to also worship other gods. No “covering your bases” or “spreading your bet” to worship the LORD but also worship the gods, just in case.

The Canaanites, you see, would probably tell their new Hebrew neighbors that if they knew what was good for them, they would be sure to honor Baal, who was the local god and controlled the rain in these here parts. Your “the LORD” may have been all you needed when you were travelling through the desert, but here in Canaan Baal is the one who runs things.

The Israelites had to promise, had to decide that day, to wor-

ship the LORD exclusively. There was to be no latitude about this.

The chapter goes on to explain that once they have “signed on the dotted line” and promised fidelity to the LORD, there will be no more “playing the field.” If the Israelites are unfaithful and cheat, there will be hell to pay. If they want to have an “open marriage,” they’d be better off if they didn’t get married, because God doesn’t believe in “open marriage” and will not put up with cheating.

Well, even with that warning from Joshua about the consequences of being unfaithful, the people go ahead that day and commit themselves to serve the LORD and the LORD alone.

They made the right decision that day, the Israelites did, when they chose to serve the True God. But looking back on that day from our much later per-

spective, we know that over the course of the next 500 years or so in the Promised Land, many, probably the great majority, of the Israelites would break the promise made that day before Joshua and worship the gods of their Canaanite neighbors in addition to worshipping the traditional Israelite god, the LORD.

(Probably not many Israelites gave up worshipping the LORD altogether in favor of worshipping the Canaanite gods. They just did both, to “be on the safe side.” It’s like it is today. Until recently not many Christians rejected Christianity altogether and became atheists or Jews or Buddhists. Much more common was to go to church at least occasionally, but also to read your horoscope religiously or to have other things (maybe hobbies) and other affiliations (maybe your sorority or your

lodge) be also important to you. For maybe the majority of Americans, belonging to a church is just one of many things they do. Being a Christian is just one of many aspects to their lives.)

(Another example of divided loyalties is how many of our Jewish brothers and sisters here in America will have a Christmas Tree and talk about Santa to their children. Some Jewish Americans have tried so hard to “fit in,” that they have “downplayed” their Jewishness as much as possible and assimilated to American culture to a degree that other Jews find shocking.)

Jesus’ disciples had to make a decision when Jesus’ imagery of eating his flesh and drinking his blood “turned off” his entire audience. Think about it. In Jewish Law consuming blood is

strictly taboo. Any animal you are going to eat (for instance, a cow, certainly not a pig) before being cooked has to have all its blood drained out onto the ground. So Jesus talking about drinking his blood, on top of the cannibalism of eating his flesh, was just plain disgusting and we could even say, obscene. I don't want to turn any of your stomachs, so I won't suggest anything similarly disgusting and offensive to our sensibilities.

Anyway, that day Jesus had totally "turned off" his audience. His disciples probably reacted the same way as the crowd—after all, they must have had the same likes and dislikes as the crowd. They belonged to the same culture. But now they had to decide if their loyalty to Jesus was strong enough to keep them on his team when public

opinion was turning dramatically against Jesus.

It was something like what has happened to President Obama of late. People who voted Republican last November and maybe some unaffiliated people who voted for Obama now see him as the incarnation of all that is evil. Witness all the little, black Hitler mustaches and the people calling him a Nazi or a socialist, or both. Somehow, President Obama has "stepped in it" and now frightens maybe half of America (roughly the same roughly half of America that voted for McCain, I imagine). Jesus had been very popular with the vast majority of Jews in Galilee up to this point. But now everyone was walking away from him. Would the disciples walk away too?

It seems that they stuck with him. At least we are not told of

any that dropped out of the movement. Peter may have spoken for all of them when he said, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Now to take it to us now. Christianity and Jesus used to be respected in Europe and wherever Europeans went. But now the situation has changed. Christianity (and all “organized” religion, for that matter) is now widely scoffed at and dismissed as something no thinking person could ever subscribe to. In some college departments (especially perhaps the social sciences of psychology, sociology, and anthropology), not one faculty member (or maybe only one or two) attends church regularly and will own up to believing in the existence of God. And it is not just university professors. Dis-

dain for religious faith is almost everywhere. Representatives of religion like the Pope, Catholic priests, nuns, and Protestant clergy are routinely lampooned in the media. So are we in an analogous situation to Jesus and his disciples the day of the “Bread of Heaven” Discourse? Will we stick with Jesus when he is unpopular?

To be a Christian or even to believe in the existence of God is a decision we make not just once at a revival meeting. Every day we are challenged to decide, to choose, to recommit.

Will we or will we not continue to believe in a good God despite evidence to the contrary in the amount of suffering and injustice there is? (This resonates with me, since the death of our only child, Alison, hangs heavy on the shoulders of my wife, Barbara and me. Deep, personal

loss can drive some people to conclude that there is no God, or if there is, that God is cruel. I go forward as a believer; I have not lost faith. But I carry pain in my heart most of the time and have no illusions about being protected from harm by God. There is no certain promise of blessing in this life. We give thanks for the good, but we know there will be evil coming too soon enough. Anyway, these are my thoughts.)

We also have the decision to make over and over again whether to do the right thing or do the easy thing or the comfortable thing. Will we stoop to underhanded methods or not? Will we resist the temptation to act on our baser instincts—our pride, our greed, our desire for things to go smoothly and easily for us? Will we or will we not be motivated by our fears—our

fear of change, our fear of people who are different from us, our fear of being wrong, our fear of being criticized, our fear of rejection? Will we be generous or stingy? Will we be forgiving or vindictive?

Everyday we these decisions to make, and we don't always choose the noble path.

Sometimes we take the path of pettiness or the path of least resistance.

What decision will we make as individuals and when we are in a group? Because a congregation makes decisions too.

You will soon have a new leader. Let her lead. Don't try to sabotage her or drag your feet. Don't turn on her and make her out to be evil, like some have done to Obama. Choose to trust in God and act on your better, not your baser instincts. May we all choose rightly. *AMEN.*