

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, NC
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Practicing Discipleship: Accepting Grace
Isaiah 55:1-9
(Lent 3)

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

A friend of mine is a neuroscience professor, and every time I talk with her I am more and more amazed at the instrument that God has placed between our ears.

On an average day, our brains help us make more than 70 difference choices. Those are the ones we make, consciously. When you factor in the decisions we make that are simply instinct, that number grows quite a bit to 35,000.¹

Every day. 35,000 choices.

Walk the aisles in your neighborhood Harris Teeter and you will see just how easy it is to hit those numbers. Want some milk?

Whole, 2%, 1%, or skim?

Organic or conventional?

Local cows or bovines from out-of-state?

With twin 15 month-olds at home, I've bought a fair amount of baby food recently. You'd think that would be easy. Instead, we find ourselves choosing between jars of baby food, or plastic containers, or squirtable pouches. It's not enough to decide between green beans or peas. Now, we also have the option of choosing blends: like apple/pear/and summer squash, or vegetable risotto with cheese.

It can be overwhelming. The psychologist Barry Schwartz calls it the "paradox of choice" – his theory is that the consequence of having too many things from which to choose is that we are less happy, and less likely to know what it is that we want.²

It's one thing to decide what to buy at the grocery store.

It is another to be faced with choices that impact lives.

For those with kids, where should we send them to school?

Public or private?

Montessori, language immersion, or international baccalaureate?

What is the best method of child behavior modification?

Reward-based? Corporal punishment? Liaise-faire?

What about college?

When we are in high school, what decisions do we need to make to make our applications stand out?

And when you are there – what about a major?

Do you go with your heart – or with what is marketable?

Do you go to graduate school – or straight to the workforce?

How about relationships?

Do we want to be married?

If so, do we wait to make a serious commitment until we get on our feet, financially?

¹ Source: Dr. Sheena Iyenger TED Talk (January 2012)

² Schwartz, Barry, *The Paradox of Choice* (2004)

Do we want children?
If so, when?
And how many?
What about a house? A neighborhood?
How much should we be contributing to our 401K?
How much should we be giving away to our church?
What are our plans for retirement?

Our lives are shaped around thousands and thousands of choices.
Some of them minor. Some of them huge.

Without knowing it, the choices we make day in and day out start to define the way we see the world. How we envision the future. How we expect to be treated. What is considered success. What is considered normal.

Where all that leads is that we tend to invest ourselves in this future we have created out of our lifetime of choices. Then we hope that whenever that future arrives it is worth all the time and effort on our part.

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A few years ago, in my annual attempt to stay relevant during the Oscar run-up, I saw a movie nominated for Best Picture called *Up in the Air*.

The main character in the movie is a man named Ryan Bingham played by the dashing George Clooney. Bingham's character is a mid-career professional. His job is to relieve people of theirs...he works for a company called "Career Transitional Services" that other firms hire to do the dirty work of corporate downsizing.

Bingham spends his life on planes travelling from one downsizing to the next. And he is a professional.

As much as he travels, he calculates that not checking a bag on the plane saves him 157 hours a year. He has a well-developed strategy for what kind of people to follow through the TSA metal detectors and the most efficient method of renting and returning a car in the airport.

Bingham's secret to life is to be unencumbered. To be free from the weight of responsibilities that come from relationships – in order that he might be better set up for success.

When asked about his life's goal – he (somewhat jokingly) describes it as accumulating 10 million frequent flyer miles...an accomplishment that would earn his name on a plane and a dinner with the CEO of the airline.

Not to spoil it for you, but the movie ends with Bingham's world unraveling when he realizes that the future he worked so hard to achieve is vapid and full of disappointment.

He is a caricature, of course; a tragic figure, a cautionary tale who hits a little too close to home for me – as someone who, perhaps like you, is enamored by a vision of the future that is defined by the freedom of doing what I please with the things that I have earned over a lifetime of hard work.

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I hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah:

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

The prophet addressed those words to God's people who had invested themselves in a future that was filled with empty promises.

Isaiah writes to God's people who were in exile...people who had been living in a land that was not their home. After a while, when you live in exile, it becomes easy to forget your roots. It becomes easy to lose your sense of what is right and what is wrong.

When you live in exile long enough, what often happens is that you are faced with the continuing need to make choices...choices that can lead you into a vision of the future that is foreign from the future imagined by God.

Isaiah wrote to a people in exile.
Through the prophet, God calls the people home.

*You who are thirsty, come to the waters.
You who are hungry, come, buy, and eat.
Eat what is good. Delight yourself in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me
listen, so that you may live.*

It is about a choice.

A choice between the empty promises of exile or the enduring promises of God.

A choice between a life filled with accumulation or a life filled with abundance.

A choice between depending on the gods of success and status and security or depending on the God who keeps covenant and offers forgiveness and mercy and grace.

It is a choice about where we will invest ourselves...and about whose vision of the future we trust.

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I have to be honest and admit that as a Presbyterian, I've always been a little leery of choices.

At least the really big ones – choices that deal with our salvation.

What I've come to know about the God we worship through Jesus Christ – and what I have learned from this Presbyterian tradition of which you and I are a part – is that our choice, when it comes to salvation, is already made.

That the choice about our salvation lies in God's hands and God's alone.

That choice has been made through a cross and an empty tomb –

An unmistakable display of the kind of love and commitment that God has for us and for this world.

Still, there is a distinction between being saved and living like we are saved.

It is a distinction that makes all the difference in the world.

If we say – as the old creed does – that we “belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to Jesus Christ” – then what that means is that our future is not only about us and about our freedom and about our comfort.

And if you have ever doubted that you and I live in exile – at a distance from the world that God ultimately imagines as our home – then think about the different kinds of choices that we would make if we lived according to God's vision of the future.

A future defined by the promise of abundance – and not the fear of there not being enough.

A future defined by justice for all – and not victory for some.

A future defined by welcome – and not exclusion.

By unconditional acceptance – and not earned reward.

Every day we are faced with choices.

Our lives are shaped by them.

So why spend our labor for that which does not satisfy?

Why not, instead, feast on the rich promises of grace?