

## “THE AGONY OF CHOICE”

When was the last time you went to the store to buy toothpaste? When I was growing up, you either chose Crest or Colgate. Today, there are dozens of different brands, each claiming their own promises: whitening, plague fighting, baking soda, mint, bubble gum flavored for the kids, etc., etc. You know exactly what I mean. Have you ordered a cup of coffee lately? It used to be a “cup of coffee” or Sanka. Now it is cappuccino, espresso, laite, mocha, decalf laite, and a dozen more offerings. Now in most ways these choices are trivial, but at the core, our consumer society cuts right to the quick---the agony of human choice. Choice, which translates freedom, is the core of what being human is all about. From birth we begin to make choices that will ultimately define who we are, and how we relate to those around us. My mom told me when I was a teenager that as an infant I stiffed armed her when she went to hold me close. Why did I do that? How did I know to do that? Now my kids so that---and I know how it made her feel!

The reason our economy works so well is that the choices seem to be endless. If we had everything we needed, our economy would come to a screeching halt. Karl Marx argued that the economic pie was a fixed size, and sooner or later there would be a limit to how the economy could grow. We seem to have proven him wrong. There seems to be an unlimited amount of things to choose from, and also appears to be an unlimited amount of discretionary spending to go along with it. I say “appear” because it is deficit spending for so many people, but if the government can do it, why not the governed. We have so many choices that it boggles the mind, including cash, credit (card or 60 days same as cash), debit, lay-away, and the biggest rip off of them all, Rent-to Own. Everything in our culture emphasizes the choices we have, but very few voices are asking “How and why are you making those choices.”

A young lawyer is approached by the Devil who says, “I can make you a partner in your firm, you will be successful and makes loads of money. All you have to do is give me your soul, and the souls of all your children.” The lawyer thinks for a minute and then reply’s, “So what’s the catch?” Now many think lawyers are easy targets, but this is an indictment of all of us. We have seen over and over again in the news how many people are willing to sell their souls. Jeffrey Skilling, the former CEO of ENRON was finally indicted in one of the biggest scams of my lifetime. Martha Stewart is on trial for her related charges for insider trading; she is an incredibly wealthy woman, why would she even mess around with something that might take her down? This list could go on for a few pages! The bottom line seems to be consistent---one can always have more. Is it any wonder that on an inner city playground, one kid would shoot another for his \$200 Nike’s?

Year after year, when young college graduates are asked about the most important benefit of their education, the answer is always “to make a lot of money.” That brings us to the passage in Luke. Jesus’ temptation in the desert. First I always have to say that this temptation had to be real. If Jesus was not tempted, he was not human. The temptation in this passage gets to the very core of Jesus’ vocation. He is not tempted with a partnership in a law firm, or with sex or riches. He is tempted at the very best of who he could be. Jesus had been led out into the wilderness by the Spirit. It was at the end of those 40 days that the temptations came. He had not eaten all that time, and he was “famished.” The implication is that Jesus had a lot of power. The first temptation was not what the devil would do, but “*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*” Jesus responds, “*One does not live by bread alone.*” Jesus has power, and has to choose how that power will be used.

The next temptation is the most insidious. The devil took him to a high place and “*instantly showed him all the kingdoms of the world.*” Jesus was offered governance over all of them if only he would bow down and worship the devil. I say this is the most insidious because what ruler hasn’t had the fantasy that they could be the benevolent dictator who could bring an end to war, famine, and poverty if they had absolute power? Now there certainly are a number of people in this country who want a Christian theocracy, but their version of Jesus doesn’t quite square with mine, so I will pass. Jesus would make a lousy ruler anyway because the poor don’t

have any powerful lobbyists. The final chapter of this story takes place at the pinnacle of the temple, where the devil says to him, “*Prove that you are the Son of God. Throw yourself down from here. Then we will see if God will protect you.*” Jesus resists. “When the devil had finished every opportunity, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Of course that happened recently. Jesus was approached by Mel Gibson...

Howard Thurman in *The Inward Journey*, writes, “There is nothing more exhausting for a person than the constant awareness that his life is being lived at cross-purposes. At such moments the individual seems to himself ever to be working against himself. What he longs for is the energy that comes from a concentration of his forces in a single direction, toward a single-end.” Thurman cites this passage in Luke as the critical moment for Jesus’ reflection on his own life purposes, and the choices proposed by Satan as the opportunity for cross purposes. A great politician, someone who could use power to feed the hungry, a magician who could perform great feats---all of those would have put Jesus at cross purposes with what God had called him to do. Again Thurman writes, “Jesus was led into the wilderness following his baptism, at which he confirmed that his life had a purpose in God’s plan. It was there that Jesus reflected upon and clarified the meaning of his life.”

The wilderness is that place where we find the cross roads, and ultimately where we have to make those really tough choices about our ultimate goals and desires. For Jesus the choice came right at the beginning of his public ministry. It was monumental because he was faced with the question that he would later answer, “My will or your will be done.” He consistently chose God’s will be done. The devil in this story is giving Jesus the choice between willingness and willfulness. Jesus submitted to the higher authority, rather than choosing what might have suited him best. Jesus consistently chose what would be of benefit for all, rather than the few.

What more defines humanity than the agony of choice. Erich Fromm writes, “Our capacity to choose changes constantly with our practice of life. The longer we continue to make the wrong decision, the more our heart hardens; the more often we make the right decision, the more our heart softens—or better perhaps, comes alive... Each step in life which increases my self-confidence, my integrity, my courage, my conviction also increases my capacity to choose the desirable alternative, until eventually it becomes more difficult for me to choose the undesirable rather than the desirable action. On the other hand, each act of surrender and cowardice weakens me, opens the path for more acts of surrender, and eventually freedom is lost.” (*The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*, pp. 173-78) The role of the devil in Luke is about choices. I think Luke would agree with Fromm that we are not created either evil or good, but we become either evil or good based on the consistency of our choices. We are faced with the same choice of willfulness or willingness.

I was really struck last week, when our guest preacher, Dr. Susan Thistlewaite, described the Chicago Public school system as wicked. She cited years of choices made by individuals, and the city of Chicago, which have led to a completely inadequate public education system cheating thousands of children. As a culture there has been that willfulness to watch our inner cities crumble rather than a willingness to make a difference. Hear the words of Fromm again: “...the longer we continue to make the wrong decision, the more our heart hardens; the more often we make the right decision, the more our heart softens---or better perhaps, comes alive...” We all know that hardness of heart---that is the only way we can watch the news at night without complete despair. We have become accustomed to those continued bad decisions, and often feel completely paralyzed, unable to make even that first step in the other direction.

What strikes me about this passage in Luke is the spiritual fortitude which allows Jesus to take that first step. As we know it leads down a path of willingness on Jesus’ part, and willfulness on the part of those who have learned to live with the way things were. I don’t intend to see the new Mel Gibson film. Everything I have read emphasizes the extreme brutality, and hour’s worth of beating and scourging. The magnitude of the violence doesn’t change anything about the passion. The bottom line is still the same. Jesus suffered because he wanted to change a system which had grown accustomed to the injustice and inequality. I have learned all too well in my own lifetime that the world has a way of crushing the idealism of those who see a different way and have the gall to say it out loud.