

## THE HARD DECISION IS THE RIGHT DECISION

### Pentecost 2 – Cycle C: 1 Kings 18:20-39; Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10

I don't know where I first heard the phrase, "the hard decision is the right decision" – or if I heard it at all! I may have made it up. But I do know that I've been testing it out for the past twenty-four years, ever since Paula and I let our offer expire on what we both thought was our dream home. Everything was in favour of our buying the house. Our agent even offered to buy our old house so that we could waive the condition of selling before we bought the new one. We couldn't really put our finger on why we had misgivings, but they were there. And so, with little reason other than "the hard decision is the right decision" we made the hard decision of not going through with the deal. Of course, we felt badly for our agent who had spent weeks with us finding the place that would meet all of our criteria. And although we knew, just from our sense of relief, that we had made the right choice, we still second-guessed ourselves; we still thought about that beautiful house on that beautiful street and its ideal location.

Just months later, however, things changed for us financially, and we realized that we would not have been able to carry the mortgage on the new house and could easily have lost our home. And then, a year later, I was called to be the Assistant Pastor at Zion, Stratford, and we needed to move to either Baden or New Hamburg. The ideal location of our dream home would have been anything but ideal.

Not all hard decisions are about money and real estate. I suspect the majority are about things that are more abstract: how will I spend my time? who do I want as my friends? what career will I work towards? Some decisions are moral decisions: will I be true because there are those who trust me, or will I play fast and loose when I know I won't be caught? will I be true to my word, or will I invent a convenient truth to justify doing something that will be more fun or more beneficial to me? will I work or be lazy? will I consider the wellbeing of others, or look out for Number One?

And then there are decisions about values: what do I believe in? what is the most important thing in my life? what qualities do I look for in others? with whom do I feel most able to be myself?

Our three Bible readings today are all about people making hard decisions. It is a happy coincidence, of course, that we landed on them as our Confirmation Sunday lessons, a day when we focus on the hard decision of following Jesus – a happy coincidence, because the three stories show that choosing to walk in God's way is nothing trivial.

The First Reading is quite literally a choice concerning with god the people of Israel will serve. Throughout their history, it seems, the fertility god Baal has always been on their radar. The injunction in the Ten Commandments to have no other gods before Yahweh, for example, is probably more about the attraction of the Canaanite's Baal to the Hebrew people than it was to some of the lesser idols and deities. Today's reading shows us how the hard decision was made: Elijah organized a contest which he earnestly wanted to be a defining moment for the people of Israel. And it was for a while. But one of the lessons we learn about faith through not only this story, but the many we read in both the Old and New Testaments, is that the decision to walk in God's way is a decision that must come from within, and then be renewed over and over again. As important as the day of confirmation is for our life in the faith, every day that follows today is just as important. Martin Luther wrote that we must die daily to sin and rise to newness of life through the ministry of prayer, study, reflection, witness and good works; or, as our national bishop, Susan Johnson, puts it, we need to pray, read, worship, study, serve, give, and tell. In other words, the hard decision to follow Jesus is made once, but is then renewed each day – sometimes several times a day. Baal is still among us, in other words, offering us a life with few challenges and demands; a life of self-indulgence and disregard for others; a life of winners and losers; a life in which rules are meant to be broken and personal pleasure is the goal of every endeavour. It's very attractive and quite easy. The path of discipleship – not so much! It's the harder decision, the one that requires our presence in community and commitment to all the hard teachings Jesus has given us. There's no other religion that calls us to love our enemies!

Our Second Reading shows the Gentiles in Galatia trying to blend the teaching they have received from the apostle Paul with other teachings they have received from other teachers in his absence. Paul has looked deeply into the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus and discovered a number of non-

negotiables. Jesus' way is the right way, Paul tells the Galatians: watering down the gospel, tweaking it here and there, results in not-gospel. People do it all the time, of course. The most prevalent Christian heresy is that if you love God enough, you will be blessed with success, wealth, and happiness. It often appears to be true, but it's not-gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to take up our cross – "cross" being a metaphor for the challenge of being people for others – and following Jesus. Sacrificial love, not self-love is the hard decision Jesus lays before us with his holy example. And in following Jesus, we are blessed, but not with comfort and ease. There is always work to do in bringing near the kingdom of heaven.

Finally, I love the story of the centurion in today's Gospel. He is a Gentile, a Roman soldier with a fair degree of power. But he has compassion for his slave who is ill and dying; and even though he is not Jewish and would certainly be criticized by his friends and colleagues for his faith, he believes in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is astounded – so much so that he says, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith!"

The centurion shows us how counter-cultural Christianity is. It still is today. I would guess that at least half of our confirmands' friends at school are not part of a faith community. The truth is that to believe in something beyond oneself has always been a hard decision for people; and most people take the course of least resistance. Existentialism, the idea that there really is nothing more to life than what we see of it, has grown exponentially in my lifetime. After all these millennia and all the miracles that stare us in the eye each minute of the day, people still don't do well with the idea of God; people still avoid abstract thinking and seeking meaning. Acknowledging a spiritual basis to life requires what we call a leap of faith: the idea that there is more to life than we can possibly know; that we are called to one another; that we are called to love and care for one another; that we are called to live for more than ourselves, our country, a philosophy, or an ideology.

And so, Confirmation Sunday is not just for the confirmands. We all join today in making the hard decision. We know it as a hard decision, because we have discovered that the life of discipleship does require much of us. But we also know it as the right decision, because we can see in all the good that is born in this community and in communities like it worldwide that it is through the church and through our daily decisions to walk with Jesus that God is truly present in our world.

God needs people. God needs people to make the hard decisions.