

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We Lutherans can get nervous when Christians talk about our choosing or our deciding — that is, when we're talking about "deciding to follow Jesus." We take to heart Jesus' words, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit*" (John 15:16). We confess our great demise because of sin, and that it takes more power than our spiritually dead persons can muster to follow Jesus. That's God's work. St. Paul says it this way: "*God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*" (Eph. 2:4-5).

Still, there's a lot of choosing going on in our texts for today. "*I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your rules before me,*" we chanted as we began the Divine Service this morning. We heard Moses say, "*I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him.*" We heard St. Paul say to Philemon, "*I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord,*" that is, "*willingly*" as the King James translates it, or "*of your own free will,*" the RSV and NASB translate it. And Jesus said to His disciples: To follow me, you've got to be ready and willing to put me before family, before things, before your own life. You've got to be ready to bear the cross.

What could all this choosing and free will possibly mean? That we can, in some way, choose to believe in Jesus? Does this mean that sinful men do cooperate with God in their salvation? That men by their own free will can make up their own minds to become a Christian or not, as Evangelicals old and new teach?

Not at all. In fact, the Scripture is clear and our Lutheran Confessions affirm that our salvation is God's work alone, from cross to conversion. Jesus' cross redeems us from the law's curse, that because of sin we are doomed to die. But Jesus redeemed us by being cursed Himself, carrying our sins to the cross, and dying in our stead (Gal. 3:13-14).

By this work, done once for all, the world's salvation was won. And yet, we know that we receive the benefits of this universal salvation as a gift from God through faith (Eph. 2:8-9), but whoever does not believe, on the other hand, is condemned (Mark 16:16).

With the "opinion of the law" working mightily in us, natural man is always looking to take some credit for his own salvation, so that after Luther's death, even in the churches of the Augsburg Confession, some were teaching that unregenerate man cooperated in his own conversion, that he chose or decided to follow Jesus.

But this is not the Scriptural view, or the Gospel view — nor the view of our Lutheran Confessions. Rather, they teach that “by the fall of our first parents mankind was so corrupted that in divine things having to do with our conversion and the salvation of our souls we are by nature blind [Ephesians 4:18].” They teach that “When God’s Word is preached, a person does not and cannot understand God’s Word, but regards it as foolishness [1 Corinthians 2:14].” They teach that unregenerate man “does not draw near to God on his own,” that he “is and remains God’s enemy until he is converted, becomes a believer, <is endowed with faith> and is regenerated and renewed [Romans 5:10].” They teach that man’s conversion “happens by the Holy Spirit’s power through the Word when it is preached and heard, out of pure grace, without any cooperation of his own [Titus 3:4–7].” (FC, SD, II Free Will:5). No choosing or deciding by man in conversion. We can cooperate in our conversion, say our Confessions, “as little as a stone, a block, or a lump of clay” (FC, SD, II:24).

So what is all this choosing in our texts today? This choosing is not being encouraged of the unregenerate person, but of the regenerate, of the believer, for the believer is “born anew [John 3:5]” and “inwardly [has] another heart, mind, and natural desire” (FC, SD, II:26). With “hearts ... renewed and ... new affections,” the believer is “able to bring forth good works” (AC, XX:29), though, to be sure, in the believer, the flesh remains, and so he struggles. St. Paul struggled, too: “*we know that the law is spiritual,*” he said, “*but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*” (Rom. 7:14-15).

Therefore, when David says, “*I have chosen the way of faithfulness,*” he’s not saying that he had chosen to believe. Rather, as a believer, he’s saying, “I’m going to follow Your word, Your statutes, Your precepts, Your rules.” And when he failed — Lord knows, David failed; he’s perhaps the most notorious adulterer and murderer ever — he cried out to the Lord for mercy! “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions*” (Ps. 51:1). He cried for mercy, confident that the Lord would “*Create in [him] a clean heart ... and renew a right spirit within [him]*” (Ps. 51:10).

Isn’t that the same for us as we gather here as sinners, though we believe? We Christians confessed together that we have sinned this week; and we are absolved, listen to God’s word read and preached, and prepare to eat and drink our medicine. Isn’t that what we mean as we conclude the Service of the Word and begin the Service of the Sacrament, singing, “Create in me a clean heart, O God”?

Likewise, when Moses was proclaiming the Lord’s word, he was doing it to believers, to the Israelites, God’s chosen people, who were preparing to cross the Jordan and enter into the promised land. Moses was not talking to the unconverted.

He was talking to believers, saying “*choose life*,” for God desires righteousness, righteous living from people accounted righteous by faith.

Isn't that so for us, too, as St. Paul teaches: God in Christ Jesus “*redeem[ed] us from all lawlessness and [purified] for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*” (Titus 2:14). Again Paul says, “*God ... works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13), even if you don't always do it perfectly. That is, our regenerate will—our will that has been truly set free—can cooperate, not in our salvation, but in the choice to do good.

Thus St. Paul, when he exhorted Philemon to take back Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, he was not trying to convert Philemon. Rather, Paul was asking Philemon, the believer, to act according to that same regenerate will and do what is right, not just according to the law, but according to the Gospel, not only take Onesimus back, but receive him back as a brother and no longer a slave.

And as Jesus taught today in the Gospel lesson, asking us to count the cost of being disciples, He was not telling us how we become disciples. We know how that's done: “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them*” (Matt. 28:19). Or, again, “*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples*” (John 8:31). And this is completely without cost, by grace alone, apart from our works. Our Augsburg Confession says it this way: “Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news” (AC V:2).

No, what Jesus was saying is that there are expectations to discipleship. It makes demands. Following Jesus has costs. “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*”

Now, “hate” is a pretty strong word here and may be especially hard for us to hear in our modern context, and especially with regard to our family, and especially for me today with my mother and sister here. Hate our own father or mother, wife and children, ...? Really? Is Jesus really asking disciples to break the commandment to honor our father and mother by hating them instead of loving and cherishing them?

Surely not. Rather, keeping the First Commandment in mind — You shall have no other gods. ... We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things ... even your family — Jesus is telling His disciples not to love “*father or mother more than me*” (Matt. 10:37) as Matthew records it. Keep Jesus first. Idols of family are no more right than idols of stone.

Similarly with regard to life. Jesus said in John's Gospel, “*whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life*” (John 12:25). Jesus is not telling you to

despise this earthly life, but rather to look for something better, something eternal — that by believing in Jesus “*though [you] die, yet shall [you] live*” (John 11:25).

Again, Jesus said, “*Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*” You see, being a Christian is not like being a member of the Batesville Country Club or the YMCA. Discipleship means suffering; there is a cost. Maybe it’s the loss of freedom — we’re more at risk of that in the U. S. than ever before. Get ready! Hopefully, you will be able to rejoice at being “*counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name*” of Jesus (Acts 5:41). Maybe your cross is the loss of livelihood. We’re getting close in the U. S. to that, too — think Masterpiece Cakeshop in Colorado or Arlene’s Flowers in Washington. The cross of many Christians around the world is having their homes destroyed, children kidnapped and abused, and sometimes even killed themselves.

The question is hard, for the cost of cross bearing can be high. Do you make peace with the world and deny Christ? Or do you hold “*fast to the word of life*” (Phil. 2:16). Remember, Jesus said, “*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).

So there’s your choice as a disciple. There are choices, but it’s not about your conversion, your becoming a Christian. It’s about how you will live as a follower of Christ, for “*[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*” (1 Pet. 2:24). God grant that you may bear your cross and follow after Jesus, no matter the cost, pursuing “*righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, [and] gentleness*” (1 Tim. 6:11), being salty Christians for the sake of Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.