

“Choosing to Live”
1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
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Dr. Stacy Johnson speaking at the NEXT Church national gathering in 2012, said that there are two ways of living as a Christian. We can live as those who are perishing, or live as though we are being saved.¹ Most of us, most of the time, live as those who are perishing. We organize our lives to forestall this inevitability. To maximize our longevity. To hedge against disaster. To protect ourselves from danger. When you're aware of it, it's easy to see this fear in our daily choices. It's safer not to talk to the person at the traffic light with cardboard sign and cup in hand. It's safer not to bother yourself with strangers or refugees, of people of different races & ethnicities. It's safer to constrict the circles of your world as tightly as possible, follow the advice of financial planner: maximize profit, minimize risk. When you're aware of it, it's easy to see this fear in our choices.

It's also easy to see in today's church. It's safer to stay behind our stained glass windows, ignore the revolutionary lyrics hiding behind pleasant hymn tunes, avoid discussing anything remotely controversial and pretend that protecting our life is the way to save it. When you're aware of it, it's easy to see this fear in our churches. And it's easy to see this fear behind the current administration. Building walls to protect us from threats. Closing borders to victims of war to keep us safe. Targeting religions whose tenets and whose people you do not understand. Turning victims into threats. Turning facts into perspectives. Turning the free press into the opposition party.

To live as though we are perishing. I'd like to be able to point out the futile ends to which this kind of living leads: the logical outcome of turning everybody who doesn't agree with you, anybody who looks or acts differently from you into enemies. I'd like to point out not only how mean-spirited it is to turn families who have left their homes to escape war and violence into our enemies, but also the cost this approach incurs to relationships with nations around the world who now see American's reputation as a hypocritical bully confirmed. I'd like to point out how paying for a wall by imposing a 20% tariff on Mexican imports means American consumers will pay for the wall, not Mexico. I'd like to help fellow citizens see that that whole reason for NATO is to prevent the kind of European bloodbath that the world came to accept as inevitable every 30 years - war that left 80 million people dead including many family members connected to our church.

But as true as all that might be, it's still living as though we are perishing. It's still cost-benefit thinking - what will produce the best outcome for me. What will produce the least amount of loss for the church? What will produce the least

¹ Stacy Johnson, 2012 NEXT Church National Gathering, Arthur M. Adams Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, November 29, 2012, <http://nextchurch.net/dallas-2012-stacy-johnson/>

amount of suffering for the nation? for the world? Those aren't bad questions to be raising. They could be the right questions for policy. I'm glad there are analysts and columnists and leaders raising them. But those questions are still motivated by fear. And we don't need to fear.

Or at least, that's what Paul is trying to tell us. That's what Jesus tried to show us. We don't need to fear. Don't misunderstand - when I look at what's actually going on, I am afraid. And I don't think Jesus wields the Gospel to shame us for our lack of courage. I think Jesus wants to strengthen us with it. But courage, according to Paul, doesn't come from an analysis of the facts around us. It comes from trust that the future is already in God's hands. Our destiny is secure. I don't mean the individualistic notions of destiny that some of us learned as children as in "I believe this or that statement about Jesus so my ticket's punched for heaven" or "I went to church, did what the priest told me to do, fulfilled at the church's requirement so my trip to pearly gates is assured." Those are cost-benefit images the church adopted after it was already in bed with the Empire, when faith got confused with bowing down to earthly power in exchange for heavenly goods.

No, I mean our world *will learn* that the only way to live is by learning to love your neighbor as you love yourself. The world *will learn* that welcoming the alien among us is the path to welcoming God into our lives. The world *will learn* that the kingdom of God is not something we wait for, passively, but something God keeps begging us to discover near to us, even within us. That's what Paul is trying to tell us. We are not perishing. We are being saved. God is active, present, at work taking all of the suffering and sin in the world into God's self. Repairing the breach between God and human beings, bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

Which is foolish to say in these times. As foolish as saying that a Roman symbol of torture is our symbol of salvation. As foolish as saying that the meek, or the poor, or the grieving people of the earth are blessed. As foolish as saying that the hungry, or the peacemakers, or the persecuted are cherished *the most* in God's heart. That's foolish talk and I'm the first to admit it. You think I find it easy to repeat what Paul is saying, much less believe it? I'm the first to admit that when I look at the world, I see it going to hell in a hand basket. I see the potential for war on the distant horizon. I see bitter winds brewing, hate and fear rising. And Paul wants me to preach apocalyptic hope. Paul wants us to live as though I'm so confident of something it takes a fool to see. It's almost offensive because it sounds so much like denial. Just pretend that immigrants and refugees aren't being targeted. Just pretend that education isn't about to get cut. Just pretend that climate change, nay science itself is about to be undermined. Just pretend that people aren't about to lose health insurance, that divisions aren't about to skyrocket.

Foolishness. But I don't think Paul is preaching denial. Denial is when you refuse to acknowledge the world as it is because you just can't face its harsh reality. So you retreat to your fantasies. You ignore your present realities. You pretend that faith is about what you can control which is to say nothing of any significance. So you sing to *distract* you from crying. Or you choose a church that *insulates* you from what's going on. Or you repeat "*God doesn't give me more than I can handle*" or any

number of other phrases that never appear in our messy Bibles to pretend that human beings aren't the greatest threat to God's good earth and its creature.

Paul doesn't preach that kind of denial. He preaches hope. Denial is when you refuse to acknowledge the world as it is because you just can't face its harsh reality. Hope is when you refuse to accept this harsh reality as your only present possibility because you know that life springs from somewhere else. It springs from someone else.

And that's a kind of freedom that's never going to come from our security. It's never going to come from cost-benefit analysis. It's not going to come from a liberal cynicism that feeds off fear as deeply as its right wing cousin. No. It comes from a God who refuses to accept the fear of Roman crosses. A God who specializes in generating possibilities out of our dead ends, in working Sundays out of Fridays, in moving mountains out of mustard seeds. And if you want to taste that kind of freedom, you can feast on it at the tables of slaves who have earned the right to pass along hope with their blood. You can share it from the bitter cup of Nazi resisters who even in prison were the freest people in Germany. You can learn it from Freedom Riders, one of whom said of his nearly deadly, brutal beating, "I never felt more alive."

We have to learn from people of faith who were able to see the world not only where it is, but where God knows it's headed precisely when making that kind of claim is foolish, unacceptable, dangerous, and ridiculous. Precisely when the poor aren't sharing in the kingdom, the grieving aren't comforted, the hungry aren't being filled. We have to learn it from people who have sung, and danced, and feasted in the presence of their enemies whom they knew God would transform one way or another. We have to see beyond what the world sees.

In the 17th century, there were only a couple of acceptable ways of rendering the image of Jesus, each of them in a glorified way that emphasized an otherworldly divinity of Jesus. It's remarkable to consider now that for over 1000 years, no one dared painted Jesus in other ways. It simply was not a possibility.

Until Rembrandt. Rembrandt broke with convention. Rather than copying 1000+ years of history, he went looking for a real, live, flesh and blood human being – and so he found a neighbor, who, like Jesus was a Jew, who like Jesus, was a refugee. And with seven paintings, one of which is on your bulletin cover today, Rembrandt changed the art world's view of Christ, and the Christian's view as well.² It's impossible to know what led him to this choice. Perhaps overcome with debt, and grieving over the death of his wife, and of 3 of his 4 children, he went looking, not for the Christ looking down on him from on high, not the Christ telling him that God never gives you more than you can handle, but the outcast, the despised, the one whose suffering mysteriously yielded yet more life.

At the dead-end of his art, he found yet more possibilities. When the darkness couldn't get any deeper he found yet more light. And in the midst of our current national crisis that's the kind of creative possibility I long for. It may be what the world most needs from the church. People who see beyond what the

² Again, I am indebted to Dr. Stacy Johnson for this Rembrandt connection that he presented in his 2012 NEXT Church keynote address.

world sees. People who can sing and dance and feast in the presence of destructive powers because they know that God isn't some idea that dictators or their priests can cart into the public square to do their bidding. God isn't some far removed philosophical point to be manipulated for partisan points. God's isn't a talking point. God is not present only in the Christian, only in the Church. God is free in the world, closest to suffering alongside slaves, and resisters, and freedom riders and others who live as though we are being saved. God is free in the world, generating possibilities out of our dead ends, working Sundays out of Fridays, moving mountains out of mustard seeds.

There are two ways of living as a Christian. We can live as those who are perishing, or live as though we are being saved. Which will you choose?