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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16  
"Choose Church Community"  
August 29, 2010

Choose.

It's a word that has been with me during my time here at Maple Grove.

It begins with the simple fact that, as a seminary student looking ahead towards the ordination path as an Elder, Maple Grove is the last church that I will choose to serve. For the rest of my career in ministry, the Bishop will be choosing for me.

...so be sure that I didn't take the choice lightly. In fact, I will admit, I did my homework on the congregation. It was not enough for me to just have a friend recommend the position. I went and read everything there was to read on the website, and even that was not quite enough.

After all, if I am going to choose to serve this church community, I wanted to be sure this was a community in which I would be comfortable. I wanted to see if this congregation could perhaps live up to the Luke 10:27 promise to love god and serve neighbor.

So, I came in, a lone ranger in the midst of strangers, to the Maudy Thursday Drama, excited and curious. I walked in and sat in that pew right there and was greeted by two of the nicest women. They rose to the challenge to 'show hospitality to strangers' identified in today's text.

I felt the warm and welcoming heartbeat of this congregation. This Friendly Patrol had truly shown me a glimpse of Maple Grove's identity on that night.

As the writer Henri Nouwen puts it, hospitality is about making space for people to be who they are. It's not only making space in your home, but also in your life, your heart, and your church.

However, hospitality is not just what you do to a stranger, but what you do to members of your own congregation as well. It begins with us. With each other. With each person in the pew with you and each person you pass as you go through life. We are called by God

to make a choice to not neglect hospitality.

TSHIRT-----

Choose.

My first adventure as a part of Maple Grove's staff was to go on the Youth Mission trip to Piedras Negras, Mexico. I found that most of the members of the team wore one of these shirts during that week. I knew of the Youth's own version of The Luke 10:27 promise: Youth CHOOSE to love god and serve their neighbor, but it was another step to actually see that in action.

It was a trip that had some big choices. Choose to cross cultural and language barriers.

Choose to rise early and stay up late for devotions. Choose to entertain the angels that were those children who had been through things that many of us could only begin to imagine. Choose to offer hospitality those children even if we may have not been able to understand their needs.

.... I want to remind you of Jenna Sprouse's reflection you may have read in August's Maple Leaf: *The manual labor was also an important part but not as much so as the relationships we all made with the children. The things I don't want to forget about our trip to Mexico is just all the feelings we all experienced that week, the passion of the people we met, and the hospitality we were given.*

Choose. For when we choose to love god and our neighbor, there are many times where we become the ones that benefit. Sometimes the Choice is to accept the hospitality of others, even when it may not be exactly what you expected. For it is then that the mutual love described in this Hebrews text can continue within us and beyond us.

Choose. Every day, we, as Christians choose what we will do. The problem is, the more difficult and varied the options we have, the longer it takes for us to make that choice.

We can get advice from others, pray about things, try to gather more information... but ultimately, many of our actions involve a choice of some kind.

The author of Hebrews outlines some ideal choices for the listeners, a second-generation church. This church, like us, never was able to witness Jesus in the flesh. They were

living, through lots of persecution, and just trying to figure out what it was that they needed to do to live rightly. There would be conflicting agendas and bad examples all around, just as we have today with media and news and the like.

But there would also be a church community on which Christians could rely. They were not alone and did not have to do it themselves. Others, though not many at that time, had walked the path before them. More importantly, others, in increasing numbers, were beside those listeners walking the path WITH them.

This lectionary text provides a pretty clear “how to” guide for living a life of faith, and makes it quite simple. The lists include a place for you to choose the path that is pleasing to God. Most of the choices presented are obvious and had been things that listeners, both then and now, have heard before.

Let mutual love continue. Show hospitality. Remember those in prison. Show empathy to the tortured. Honor commitments to each other.

The amazing pattern with all of this is that it all involves interaction with one another.

We are called today to love, to covenant, to interact with and rely on our neighbors in these ways, just as the church spoken to in Hebrews was called to do. We need one another to work together to keep our faith and to overcome times of trial. The “I’ll do it myself” mentality can only get you so far, friends. And do-it-yourself tends to run out of steam much quicker in faith communities called to be a body together.

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Now, the fact is that we all make mistakes in our choices at one time or another. We all have chosen that do-it-yourself would be easier, and, frankly, sometimes it really just is.

But, do it yourself can be troublesome, for we are not created by God to be in a vacuum.

No one person alone can fulfill God’s creation dream. No one person alone can create the many parts of the body of Christ. No one person alone may bear the burdens- not for one family. Not for one circle of friends. Not for one congregation. Not for one community.

Not for this world.

When taken too far, the do-it-yourself mentality is an extreme that can harm the church, and one's own spirit. This text reminds us that while our behaviors matter, and they do matter quite a bit, and while our faith leaders examples are important, important enough to be imitated in fact-- the one thing that we can always return to is our forever unchanging God and say with confidence "the lord is my HELPER, I will not be afraid, what can anyone do to me?"

I think the biggest challenge in this text is to give up the DIY thought pattern. We are not a do it yourself church and Our God is certainly not a do-it-yourself God.

God is our helper in all things, and God has gifted us with a community of believers to assist us in fulfilling God's creation dream. All we have to do is Choose.

Choose to make our "I"s be "We"s. Choose to make the "my" be "our" - In all our times good and our times bad - We can replace do it yourself with we're in this together - and we will come through.

Our foundation is indeed firm. And it is laid, in part, here in this word in the book of Hebrews. God has given us aid in a variety of ways and strengthens us with two basic foundations of faith that are claimed by this congregation in its identity.

First, as we said, we have our God and we have our pastoral leaders, both have shaped us, nurtured us, and prepared us well for this journey together.

As we are a community that Loves God, so may we also be a community that gives thanks to those who have helped to make God a greater part of our lives.

Now, I want to revisit the scripture using Eugene Peterson's "Message" paraphrase. In the effort to make things a bit more accessible, Peterson's version of this text takes on another way of approaching what the author was getting at.

*Appreciate your pastoral leaders who gave you the Word of God. Take a good look at the way they live, and let their faithfulness instruct you, as well as their truthfulness. There should be a consistency that runs through us all. For Jesus doesn't change—yesterday, today, tomorrow, he's always totally himself.*

Choose -- for our God and our faith leaders of the past and present are always with us. We are not alone. We are a church that is loved and is loveable.

We have had many leaders in our lives, whether parents or friends or youth leaders or teachers or pastors who have cared for us in one way or another. It is my prayer that each of those leaders had a part of their own lives of faith that we can consider, take a good look at, and find more good that we make take into ourselves in order to multiply that to others.

The best compliment that you can ever give someone is to imitate their faith- so let us do just that: let us live our lives with the faith of our leaders and the faith of Jesus Christ.

Second, we are a church that knows how to serve. We know in our heads all of the instructions that we have been given. The challenge is to choose to remember them. ... To return again to the text from Peterson:

*Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of "sacrifice"—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets.*

Choose-- No matter where you may be, to have your actions serve as worship. Now it may not look quite like our worship does here. But just as Jesus never changes, I pray that we may have that consistency within us that never takes for granted the potential we have to live out our faith in a new and bold way.

And so we go forth. Out of this place to continue our worship elsewhere. To serve and to value one another in all settings, from our homes, to the farm, to offices, to schools, and beyond.

We have to choose. Let us pray.