

Sermon: Like Trees Planted by Water

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 12, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I still remember a few years back, prior to COVID, when I went back to Taiwan with my parents. I had just stepped down as the minister of the congregation in Montreal, which afforded me some time to travel, to recharge and recoup. I chose to return to Taiwan, my birthplace, to Taipei, my hometown.

Mom and Dad, at that time, were still relatively healthy. Dad was still active in playing golf; Mom's trembling, due to Parkinson as we found out later, was still barely noticeable. They were doing their version of snow-birding—instead of travelling to Florida to escape the Canadian winter, they flew across the Pacific Ocean to spend time in Taiwan.

It was good for me to spend time with them, to live with them again, and to care for them not as their pastor, but simply as a son. We got to reminisce in the old neighbourhood where I grew up, visited the old family home in the mountain (at the grace of the new owner, since it had been sold long ago), and we attend my home church, where I, or more precisely we as a family, were baptized. The old church, nestled in a busy neighbourhood, was still as vibrant as ever. Familiar faces with added wrinkles and greying hairs greeted me, as if I had never left thirty-plus years ago. Mom and Dad were still seated in the same old corner, seemingly reserved just for them, even in their period of absence.

Songs of praise drifted across the sanctuary, hands went up without prompting, so did ours. Spontaneous prayers erupted...did I tell you I didn't come from the Presbyterian tradition? I came out of a more evangelical and Pentecostal congregation. Presbyterianism is more of an adopted tradition for us when we immigrated to Canada. Watching my parents, swaying to hymnals and praise songs, though their bodies aging, limbs trembling, they looked content—with smiles on their face, joy in their hearts. Here in that old church, cloaked with habit and hope, they were at home.

They had long ago made their choice, to be planted by the water—the water of life. They had and continue to bear fruits, their leaves never wither. The wise path they chose, they had chosen well. The words of God

sustain and nourish them; though their bodies were failing, their spirit flourishes.

The lectionary text today is all about choices. Psalm 1 lays out the two paths—path of the wicked which is like chaff blown away by the wind, or path of the righteous which is like trees planted by the water. The choice is stark, the consequences clear. If the entire corpus of 150 Psalms describes the walk of faith with God, then the placement of Psalm 1 is God's way of saying to us: choose life! Choose life! As the Sovereign Lord declares elsewhere in the Scripture, "*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O my people?*" (Ezekiel 33:11)

The reading in 1 John 5, makes that choice even more clear: "*Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*" The testimonial about the Son of God is not limited to human origin, God testifies to the Son. And this is the testimony: "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in the Son." This life eternal is not something you gain after death, but is something you can possess here and now, in the form of abundant blessings in faith, hope, and love, overflowing as blessings to the many, So that shalom, "*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 4:7)

I know some of you may be uncomfortable with the starkness of such a choice. Some may even say life is not that simple. I agree. In fact life is rather complicated, and choices one makes, even in the path of faith, do not always line up so neatly. Case in point is the passage in Acts 1:15-26. I should warn you that I read this story as a case of what not to do.

It was after the Ascension of Jesus Christ, when the Lord was lifted up to the heaven, in plain sight of the disciples. Before his departure, Jesus instructed them, in no uncertain term, to wait. Wait in Jerusalem, and wait for the promise of the Father, that is the coming of the Holy Spirit. This coming of the Holy Spirit would occur during the Pentecost, which is the subject of next week's sermon. But coming back to this period of waiting.

Peter stood up. It was always Peter, bold, decisive, stepping out of the boat, speaking without thinking, and in this case, tired of waiting. So he stood up among the group of one hundred and twenty persons, of brothers and sisters gathered in waiting. Without any instruction from God, nor prompting of the Holy Spirit, Peter wanted to do a bit of housekeeping.

Twelve is a good number; eleven not so. Since Judas had betrayed Jesus and killed himself out of guilt, the number of apostles was, one short. So Peter wanted to add one to their rank. The criteria he set out, once again without any basis, were three: it would have to be a man (go figure); this man must have been with Jesus from the beginning; and he must have witnessed the resurrection of the Lord. Out of that set of seemingly sensible but rather arbitrary criteria, two candidates emerged: Joseph called Barsabbas, aka Justus (I don't know how any can trust a person with three names, but I digress) and there was Matthias.

Then they finally prayed to God, saying in verse 24, "*Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.*" Good prayer, asking the Spirit of God to speak to each one's heart, and revealing to them the choice of God. But in practicality, they cast lots.

In the Old Testament, there were instances where lots were used, as divination, a mean of determining God's will. In Leviticus 16, Moses cast lots to separate the scapegoat from the the one sacrificed to the Lord. In Numbers 26, Moses, again, used lot to allocate tribal territorials of Israel. In 1 Samuel 14, lots were used to determine who broke the oath made by Saul. In Jonah 1, desperate sailors cast lots to see who ought to be thrown overboard to appease the raging storm.

However, Deuteronomy 18 and Leviticus 19 list a number of abhorrent practices of foreign nations, and divination is one of them. On balance, I would say the practice of casting lots to inquire of God's will is at best, dicy (puns intended).

In the New Testament, the only other instance when lots were cast, was when the Roman soldiers divided Jesus's garments during his crucifixion. And of course, there was Peter, instructing the supposedly waiting disciples to cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles, then we never hear from him again in the New Testament. I am sure Matthias was a nice guy, faithful even, but as far as his contribution to the furtherance of the Gospel, the New Testament witness recorded none.

Was this a case of the will of God revealed, or a foolhardy attempt of housekeeping that got ahead of God? Well, you can probably guess where I come down on this. But I have to say most commentaries that I consulted lean towards deference to Peter's action.

A notable exception I came across recently is in the book titled: *When the Church Stops Working*, co-authored by Andrew Roots and Blair Bertrand. Some of you have read it too; it was used by the Presbytery of Ottawa during their retreat last Fall. An entire chapter was devoted to this subject of Matthias chosen by lots. Their contribution to this discourse, which I find to be brilliant, is acknowledging Paul (formerly known as Saul), as the true apostle, one chosen by God, not by lots.

Paul was the one who encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Though formerly a persecutor of Christians, his transformation empowered him to preach Jesus so much more effectively than others. Paul was the one who was chosen by God as the apostle to the Gentiles, though in a number of his letters, he seems to be always defending his apostleship. His contribution to the furtherance of the Gospel is undeniable, but it really took a while before the other apostles finally accepted Paul. Root and Bertrand clearly saw the choosing of Matthias by lots as getting ahead of God, and I would wholeheartedly agree.

Interpreting this text of Acts 1 in such a way, teaches us a valuable lesson in waiting upon God, a lesson I have raised elsewhere that 'people propose but God disposes'. It is a complicated interpretation, but life is complicated, and so is the journey of faith. Perhaps the real lesson for today is coming back to choice.

Faith is about choices, choosing good over evil, choosing righteousness over wickedness, choosing to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, trusting in him and obeying everything he commands. Those choices are ours to make. However, faith is also about God's choices, of choosing us in Christ, of planting us like trees by water, and gifting us with faith.

Let me conclude my reflection today with this paragraph in the confession of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Living Faith 6.1.2: "God brings us to faith in many ways. We may have trusted in God from childhood; or our faith may have come later in life. Faith may come suddenly or only after a struggle to believe. Whatever the spiritual journey we have traveled, God honours our faith, great or small."

God honours our faith, great or small. And thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**