

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
February 12, 2012

What do **you** choose?
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Sermon Notes

[Readings & Audio](#)

What do we choose?

When you read Paul, you enter into a history lesson. In I Corinthians this morning we have him addressing the people of Corinth. And they were a tough bunch. With a long tradition of pagan worship, idols, and wild and gluttonous rituals – he had his hands full in keeping those he had persuaded in the fold while trying to bring others in – all the while traveling the Ancient Lands, communicating by letters!

And Corinth was causing him some concern. Think raucous “Animal House” parties as a way of life. Think of Paul viewing his body as a temple, filled with the Spirit of God, preaching, not accepting pay so as not be confused with someone who would say whatever they needed to say to get paid; encouraging his followers to do the same – while they live in a society of pagan practices and pagan-friendly folk caught up in the Isthmian Games (the off Olympic year games and over the top festivals that had been played since ancient times and named after the Isthmus of Corinth.)

And there are reasons for Paul to be in Corinth. Under the Roman emperor Claudius in the third and fourth centuries BCE, expelled all the Jews from Rome. Many fled to Corinth and so it was a likely place for Paul in his missionary work to go.

Paul is pleading with those in the church he founded in Corinth not to lose their way. Using illustrative language and anything else his persuasive spirit and words are able to produce: he assigns the analogy of the race of the games with running the race for salvation. You can almost here him in what must have been a most charismatic voice:

- Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.
- Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

- So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

What “to go” meant then and means now. What a difference.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he was met by Aquila and Priscilla, two Jews earlier expelled by Cladius, who took Paul to the synagogue where many Jews and Greeks were persuaded to the Gospel. It is where Paul stayed with Aquila and his wife (also called Prisca) and worked as a tent maker. Paul remained with Aquila and Prisca in their homes in Corinth and Ephesus for a little less than two year, then heading off for Syria and elsewhere, continuing his missionary journey.

His letters to Corinth were in response to situations, most notably the factions that were beginning to develop as those converted slipped back into the secular ways of the games and associated pagan games and worship that were a part of it. There were those, too, who were starting to feel the pressure of “being different” than so many around them. They were probably hearing a lot about how boring they were, how much fun they weren’t having, and why did they follow such a loser for a God?

Paul was trying to get them to hang in there. Set aside the voices and the narrow times of human satisfaction for an eternal life

What I always find interesting is the idea that somehow we think we are much different than the folks of Jesus’ or Paul’s times. It occurs to me that if we lived then in their times or they lived now in our times, we’d be the same. The human condition is still the human condition. And for all we’ve gotten better a closer look challenges that as a pure notion.

“Well, we don’t war like they did!” you might say.

Really. If we added up all the lives lost in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Bosnia, the Sudan conflict, Korea, a Civil War, Mexican American War, World Wars – or the nearly 600 conflicts categorized as wars since 1816 on correlatesofwar.org – there is a good chance that all the casualties would have pretty much wiped out the entire population of the Ancient East in Paul’s day.

And weaponry? They were brutal barbarians. Oh? Napalm, bazookas, nuclear weapons, drones.

No, there are good arguments to make that despite our civilization and two thousand years of distance between Paul and us, between the people of Corinth at the time and us – there’s a good argument to be made that we have become more immersed in war as a solution to our factions and more brutal in the

destructive power of our weaponry, disguised as strength, decisiveness, and justice.

And, I think, it is the same mindset, the same thinking and primitive satisfaction that produces these things that is obsessed with winning. Winning the race, whatever it is – except when it comes to salvation: read following a life of gospel living. Instead the race seems too close to heading off the cliff of pursued barbarism and domination over others.

We still have the deepest most difficult problems in getting along, primarily because of the inequity in our systems of living and the oppression of minorities. As Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome to an exile in Corinth, “Just get them out of my sight” he might have said. In some ways, tragically, we do the same. And the result of such factions and division build thick and nearly impenetrable walls between us.

Get them out of my sight!

This desire to fracture or as Paul calls it, to break in factions is subtle, pervasive, and dangerous. It takes on many forms. It crosses social, economic, theological, and personal boundaries. It blurs vision and moral choices. It confuses us.

“What should I do?” Whose side should I be on?” “Should I tell or keep quiet?”

For Paul the answer was clear. It was clear for him because it was clear for Jesus. In fact in some ways, both of them probably had some problems understanding why others didn’t get it.

And in each, there was a great love of God and trust in Spirit that naturally brings with it a love of one another with an inclination and exhortation to the possible. It is why we care for each other and why the factions that divide us are so destructive and so deadly.

We live in a time where the invisibility inherent in faction building of the “other” except when the other comes too close and needs to be pushed away, is something we have to work on. We have to work on the way we are misled about what is acceptable when it comes to caring for one another. It is not acceptable, in my mind, to know of abuse and not report it; to know of someone living alone and in need and not seek help; of someone living in the belly of the city in unsafe conditions and ignore or idolize it.

Yes, addressing factions and invisibility puts us into close proximity with that which we too often wish to avoid, forget, or turn a blind eye towards. Not only is that not loving toward others it creates the system of marginalization and inequity in which we struggle and lament today. And when boundaries of friendship or

hatred cause us to turn that blind eye toward those in need, we, ourselves, are blinded and lost on the path.

Paul explains the Corinthians that he is not asking the to do anything he wouldn't do. The reason he works so hard to be faithful and give testimony to the gospel is so that when he asks others to do things he is not asking them to do anything he isn't doing himself. Talk the talk and walk the walk.

It is that which this sanctuary and JHCNH has always known. The people gathered here and in places like it – have power to change things, great things, with the simplest of actions. There are those here who volunteer and support our outreach from folding clothes and supporting our clothing room to being here every Sunday morning readying the worship and meal for you. Yes, for you.

In Mark's familiar telling of Jesus healing the leper. There is that very interesting part where the leper looks at Jesus and says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And Jesus said, I do choose.

At that moment something flowed through Jesus to the person with leprosy. Something deeply cosmic and loving travel from God through Jesus to the person now healed. Nothing was required except that Jesus chose to answer the call – to help the least among the society of his time.

Most people of his time avoided, turned away, were blind to the lepers and the unclean. Jesus chose to see and to act. If you choose, said the leper.

I choose, said Jesus.

And us, what about us?

What do we choose?