

Each of us comes upon moments in our lives where we have to take a stand. We have to make a choice and follow through on it.

Sometimes these choices are on a small but important scale. The ever-present question of “what are we going to eat for dinner tonight?” comes to mind - you know you have to eat, so you need to make a choice of what it is you’re going to eat and then follow through on it.

But sometimes these questions get at deeper and bigger things in life that take more time and more nuance to really make a good choice. One of these moments in my life was deciding about going to seminary. As many of you know, for most of my life I planned to be a lawyer - I took the LSAT, had an internship at the UW Law School - the whole thing. But as I started to realize that maybe law wasn’t the right path for me, the one I was called to anymore, I had some decisions to make. Seminary was a great option that opened up for me, and I also considered going for a masters’ of social work program too. But there came a point that fall of my senior year in college where I had to make a decision about what my next life step would be. I couldn’t choose all three of these things, and I knew that going to graduate school was the next step for me. I couldn’t be wishy-washy about it anymore, I just had to make a decision and follow through on it.

We all know how that story ended, and which decision I ended up making. It involved a lot of prayer, a lot of tears, and finally a sense of peace, that I made the right choice and that God really was with me on the journey. When you make the right choice, a peace which surpasses all understanding tends to flow through you - in your mind, in your body, in your spirit.

But in that moment where you recognize - this is when I have to make a decision - some of the most important things to consider are what Jesus says to us throughout the Gospels.

In today’s Gospel, we hear echoes of last week’s story too - the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus commands us to love God and love our neighbors above all else, the greatest commandments. Jesus teaches us to love others as we love

ourselves. Jesus chooses the outcasts, the people on the fringes, the lowly people and even amidst a flock of 100, would leave the 99 behind to find the single lost sheep. Jesus calls us to bring the kingdom of heaven closer through these teachings, these actions of including all people, loving our neighbors, and bringing the lowly up higher.

How can our decisions make this reality that Jesus teaches, commands, and calls us to actually happen?

As we see throughout the Scriptures, we are not alone in trying to figure out that reality, and how to bring it closer. So many of the stories we hear are of people in Jesus' time trying to figure out what Jesus means in his teachings about the kingdom of God. In today's Gospel story, Jesus teaches even the chief priests and the elders more about the kingdom of God. These priests and elders are the experts in this temple, have been around a long time, and are often the ones who lead the people in the community.

And yet, they are hesitant and wishy-washy about Jesus' question - "did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?". The story begins with these chief priests questioning Jesus' authority and his teachings. Jesus knew from where his authority came, from God, but he framed a question to allow the chief priests to acknowledge His authority themselves. The people regarded John the Baptist as a prophet, one who by God's Word and authority baptized people and brought the kingdom of heaven closer. And if the priests said Jesus' authority was of human origin, then that would negate the power from which John was baptizing. But the priests did not want to recognize Jesus' authority from God in his teachings and ministry, as it went against the customs and laws they knew so well. So instead of recognizing the truth and putting themselves at risk, they were noncommittal and just said "We don't know".

Jesus then, as he so often does, demonstrates his point to the priests by telling a story. This story was about two sons and whether or not they follow through on their word and go work in their father's vineyard. The first son initially said he wouldn't do it, but then went and did work in the

vineyard. The second son said he would do the work, but then didn't follow through. The son who actually did the work, whose actions reflected the desire of his father, is the one whom Jesus praises. This first son who did the bidding of his father and put in the work is the one who Jesus says is like the kingdom of heaven. The one who followed through, who took action, is like the people who believe in Jesus' authority, who believe in the work of God in our world, who actually follow through on the word of our Heavenly Father. When we make decisions, when we take actions and step up, the kingdom of heaven is brought closer when we do what God our Father calls us to, in the words of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The call that Jesus gives us is to love all people. In this story He does not shy away from saying that even some of the most hated people in society, some of the most outcast and downtrodden folks in society, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, would be the first to enter God's heavenly kingdom, because they believed in Jesus. They believed in the teachings of Christ Jesus our Messiah, did not argue with his messages to love God and love neighbors, to lift up the lowly and love the least of these. Instead they believed, and they lived. When we believe, and we act upon the promises and callings of God in Christ Jesus, then we too live. We have life, abundantly. We need simply to choose love for the sake of the other, for the sake of God who makes all these things possible, rather than choosing just for our own sake, to uphold our own constructions of things, our human things.

I do not think that any of us, when we make a decision to act from a genuine place of care and love for our neighbors, feel worse after we've done that action of care. In fact, we feel even better when we live into God's call to love the people around us.

And let's be honest, love isn't always the pretty or romanticized stuff that we like to think about. Sometimes love means an honest look at patterns of behavior that are no longer serving you or the people around you and making a change to your actions. Sometimes love means having difficult

conversations to get to a healthier place with those you love. Sometimes love looks like some personal sacrifice in order to protect the livelihood of the neighbors around you. And in the case of Jesus, sometimes love looked like sacrificing his life on the cross for the sake of all people. People he hadn't met yet. People who may or may not have loved him back. And even for the sake of the people from his own community who called out for his crucifixion and death.

So as you make decisions that go forth, especially the big decisions that impact people beyond just yourself, ask yourself, "how can this decision bring the kingdom of God closer?". How can I follow through on the teachings of Jesus, to love God and my neighbor above all else, in the choices I make? Jesus teaches us that even the people on the outskirts of society, judged and cast down by those in power, are worthy of God's love and indeed will enter the kingdom of heaven even before these chief priests and elders. How can we tangibly love and welcome people on the outskirts of society and cast down by those in power in our decisions and actions? I pray that we will all welcome God's authority, God's callings to us, as we make choices in our lives. I pray that we will be blessed by acting in service to others. And I pray that God's kingdom of love, creation, new life, and grace, will rule over us all. Thanks be to God, Amen.