

“There Are Choices to Make!”

The Reverend Dr. Robert M. Zanicky

First Presbyterian Church

Wilkes-Barre, PA

Joshua 24:1-34; 14:24

March 2, 2008

I recently heard about a family that just had their newborn baptized in their church. On their way home, little Johnny, the baptized infant's brother, was sobbing in the back seat of their car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Why was he crying? Finally little Johnny blurted out, “The minister said, when he was baptizing my sister, that he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home, and I want to stay with you guys.”

Ouch! Probably, little Johnny just needs a little more Sunday School and church.

Of course the minister was talking about families, individuals, making a choice to live as Christians and to bring their children up in the Christian faith.

Indeed, there are choices to make!! As Americans we are extremely “gifted” in the number of choices we can make. As I teach my students at Misericordia University, from the beginning, the plethora of denominations vying for attention, commitment, and recognition from Puritans to Quakers to Anglicans and many more – choices were being made. A realization took hold, “I can choose where I worship, freely worship!” And from this smorgasbord of choices in choosing one's religious affiliation – the next step to freely choosing to govern them selves was inevitable. There was such a logic to this next move – revolution!

Making choices came once again to my mind, in reading the New York Times article this past Monday on the Pew Forum's National poll, titled “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.” (I subsequently went to the full report at the Pew Forum webpage.) I'm also grateful that Jeanne shared a similar article from USA Today with me this week.

My guess is, it has become apparent to you that religion, interest in religion is on the rise, worldwide. The secularization hypothesis of the past 50 years has been proven false. Nevertheless, religion is in process. That is to say “evolving”, “transforming,” and/or “devolving” – depending on your view, position, vantage point.

Choices are being made!

78.4% of Americans call themselves Christians. There has been an increase in the “unaffiliated.” 7% of the adults said they were unaffiliated with a faith as children. That segment increases to 16% of the population in adulthood.

Please understand, this unaffiliated segment's increase does not mean that Americans are becoming less religious. It is just that many of them are NOT in churches.

An intriguing find is that 44% of Christians in America have chosen to leave the faith in which they were raised in favor of another church denomination. Actually what is happening is people – individuals,

families – are choosing their church, their faith family, according to their “personal experience” in finding a church home.

There are numerous other fascinating details in this study, but what I want to highlight this morning is the “unaffiliated population” out there – that perhaps is waiting to be invited into our Christian community here at First Presbyterian Church.

As you have heard before, and I hope you commit it to memory, we are a Friendly, Inclusive and Welcoming church! This will be of no surprise to you, but I believe a Christian community is good for, healthy for, individuals and families. I hope you also believe this! Spiritual, moral, intellectual direction is offered and supplied here in our church.

Friendships are made.

There are choices to make!

You need to choose if you are willing to offer to friends, family, neighbors, co-workers – a choice for First Presbyterian Church; A worshipping community that inspires, uplifts, challenges, and enfold God’s children from many walks of life!

Now the situation is different, but Joshua’s declaration still rings true today. Joshua knew that his people needed to step up to the plate, to make a choice in terms of what god, what ultimate guidance would be their default position. He gives a rousing speech. He proclaims the wondrous events of their past. How Yahweh – called Abraham to leave his home, and go to Canaan; how Yahweh delivered the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery through Moses; how Yahweh – brought them to where they are now.

And Joshua, concerned for them, for his people, asks the question: “What is it going to be? You’ve heard our story. You’ve shared in our common experience. What is it going to be?” “Choose!” “Choose today whom you will serve!”

- Are you going to serve the old gods of your tradition, back in the old country?
- Are you going to serve the new gods of those around you?
- Or are you going to serve the God that has established certain Laws that enhance life and call us to responsibility?

A moral, ethical God – that declares laws that include concern for others, justice, mercy and love. This is where Jesus derived his view of life and God.

Jesus was at home with Yahweh.

Joshua declares – “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

That’s his choice!

He and his house choose to serve the God that is expansive and moral.

Did you notice in Joshua’s question – that the one choice not available was – choosing no god. One way or another you are going to choose a god. Be cognizant of this and make an informed choice.

At some level – it is up to you to choose your god.

And it will make a difference in the way you live.

The marketplace is open. If you know of other “searchers” – invite them to journey with us, this may be their sustaining community, if not we will bless them on their continued search.

“Choose!” Give others the opportunity to “choose” First Presbyterian Church as their spiritual home. For all of us, there are choices to make!

Amen.