

The great theologian Woody Allen says we're at a crossroads. He said, "One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let's pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

Fortunately, not all our choices are as grim as Woody Allen finds them. But we do have lots of them. We're fortunate to have so many. Every morning we can choose what to eat for breakfast, what to wear, and how to get to work. When not working we can choose how to use our leisure time. We can choose colleges, vocations, life partners, and places and ways of worship – or whether to worship at all.

But this gift of choice is a two-edged sword. When we make a choice, as we're choosing one thing, we're necessarily not choosing something else. If I choose to go to the store today, I'm choosing not to go to the store tomorrow. If I choose to watch the Cavaliers, I may be choosing not to watch the Indians. By definition, the gift of choice means that we can't have everything.

Joshua knew this when he gathered the people in Shechem. After he reminded them of the wonderful, mighty things the Lord had done for them, he called on them to make a choice about whom they would serve. Who will it be? The gods your ancestors worshipped, the strange gods of this new land, or the Lord who's chosen you for a purpose and done such wonderful things for you so you can fulfill it? "You have a choice to make," he tells them, "And you need to make it today."

But if you choose the Lord God, you'll be choosing not to serve other gods. If you choose any other god, then you're choosing against the Lord. You can choose whoever you want, but you can't choose them all. Then he told them, "but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua makes it clear that even though God has chosen us for covenant relationship, we're not compelled to choose God. Hmmm. Even though we're chosen, we still have a choice to make.

Or do we? When it comes to God, do really have a choice? Taken at face value, today's reading from John, sounds like we don't. Jesus tells the disciples, "You didn't choose me, I chose you!"

Joshua says we have a choice and Jesus says we don't. Is this one of those maddening places where it seems like the Bible's talking out of both sides of its mouth. What are we to believe?

In some ways, we like it when Joshua says that we have a choice to make, because choosing appeals to our desire to be in control, while hearing Jesus say that we didn't have a choice, because he's already chosen us, goes against our deep desire to be independent. So, which way is it? Do we have a choice to serve God, or has the choosing already been done for us?

Truth is, part of the choosing has been done for us. God, our creator, has chosen to love us, his children, in spite of how disappointing, stubborn, and hurtful we can be. God has chosen to love us, regardless of all that, and to show that love by daily blessing us with all we need for life. God has chosen to love us by giving his most precious gift, Jesus, his only begotten son.

It's because of that choosing, God's choosing to love us, that we find ourselves gathered in Christian community. It's why Jesus describes us as grapes growing on branches, nourished by one central vine.

So what's this image tell us?

Well, when you look at a grapevine or cluster of grapes, it's hard to tell where the vine stops and the stems begin. All you see is the fruit that the vine's produced.

Think about those grapes! They can't choose whether to be red or green, seedless or not. Can't choose to grow in a fine vineyard or in a backyard. Nor choose which other grapes will be on the vine with them.

Grapes in the same cluster are generally indistinguishable one from the other, and their fruitfulness depends only upon their relationship to the vine, not themselves. There are no self-made grapes.

That's how Jesus describes us! As small, indistinguishable orbs, plopped together with other orbs we

didn't select, dependent on something else for life. That suggests that we have little choice at all.

When we do get to make choices in our lives, there's almost always a "so that" involved, isn't there? I might choose to go to bed early "so that" I'm not tired tomorrow. I can choose to go to work "so that" I can save for a home. Nine times out of ten, where a choice is being made, there's a "so that" behind it.

That's how it is for Jesus. Right after he says that the choice wasn't ours but his, he shares the "so that." We've been chosen for something important – "so that" we'll produce good, lasting fruit.

For some, it may be "so that" we'll preach about God's love. For others, it may be "so that" we'll study the scriptures and teach others the good news! For others, it may be a call to parent, our own, an adopted or foster child, "so that" we can help to a young one know, trust, and share God's love. But whatever it is, for each of us, his choosing us means we're called to do it, "so that" God's will may be done.

"So that God's will may be done, not our own!

But how do we know its God's will that we're doing? How can we know if the fruit of our labor is good and will last? By looking at why we do it, whether it's for the good of the vine, or our own. By looking at the good it brings to all. We live on the vine, not for ourselves, or for what we can get out of it, but so that we can produce good fruit for God. And the fruit that's good, the fruit God wants, is that we pass on the blessing of steadfast love and care we receive every day, because we are "on the vine."

Jesus says that in choosing us to go and bear good, lasting fruit, he's making us his friends. Frederick Buechener describes what that means in his book called Whistling in the Dark: *To be Jesus' friends, we have to be each other's friends, possibly even lay down our lives for each other. You never know. It is a high price to pay, and Jesus does not pretend otherwise, but the implication is that it's worth every cent.*

So, we do have a choice. And because it's clearly a costly one, we can ignore that call to love and serve Christ, or deny it, or just plain tune it out. In lots of ways, we can choose this day not to respond to God.

But that choice is merely a denial of the wonderful reality that already is - we belong to God, we are connected to God. And because we belong to God, we also belong to each other, and are connected to each other. The more we understand life and faith, the clearer that should be.

The world's told us a lie - that we can live separately, independently, selfishly, for ourselves – even said that's the way to life. Yet, the truth is that everything God's made – each of us as individuals, our families, our neighbors, as well as other nations, and the whole creation – are all connected. How could we think that we can live separately, for ourselves, without damaging, not only our relationship to our creator, our families, our neighbors, other nations, the creation? Of course, we can't. The one who's given us life, and all we need for life, has given those blessings for us to share, for the good of all, not to hoard, as if they belonged to us alone.

So, it's true, every day we must, "choose this day whom we will serve." We really do have a choice, and it's not a no-brainer, not a done deal. We can choose to live the truth of who we are - grapes on God's vine, grapes who are just one grape among many others, or choose to live to deny that truth, stubbornly insisting that we are self-made, so we can be self-absorbed, self-focused, selfish.

If choose to live the truth, that we're grapes on God's vine, it means accepting that no vine is perfect, that it always include some grapes we'd prefer were on some other branch. It means rejoicing in the blessings other grapes receive, not being jealous or competing with them. It means staying with the vine, not trying to cut ourselves off from it. It means sharing what God gives us with the others, rather than holding on to what we receive for ourselves.

These are not just platitudes – they are choices we live out every day, with the particular bunch of grapes with which God has chosen for us to grow.

So, we're on God's vine, connected to God, and one another. How do we live that reality?

By coming together to know, love, and trust, God and one another more fully. Showing that love and trust by sharing the blessings we receive, so that God is honored in the work we do for one another. Choices about whether to grow in this way are before us all the time – as the Bethany cluster of grapes.

A choice I celebrate, that I see you making every day, is to care for one another, to visit, make a phone call, send a card, or pray for someone who's sick or dealing with a life-challenge. Again and again, those who've been sick or in need tell me how much such love and care has meant to them.

The Retreat Committee is trying to nurture that kind of love and care, working to bring us together, so we can begin to get to know each other, or come know each other better, and become more of a family. This week they gathered to begin to plan the Fall Retreat. I was inspired by the joy and enthusiasm, the outpouring of ideas, and their high hopes to offer us all an opportunity to do just that. They will have a wonderful gift to give us. But it's one that has to be shared, together. Will we accept it?

Over the years a source of Bethany's strength is that our Sunday School has involved adults as well as children - a two hour program, where parents brought their children for the 1st hour and went to classes themselves. Not only that, adults continued to attend classes when their children were grown. Our Sabbath responsibility was seen as not just to worship, but to accept the gift, the opportunity, to come together to learn and grow in faith. And that responsibility was seen as life-long! But this foundation has weakened. Not only do we mirror the culture in attending less often, but many children are brought only for the second hour of Sunday School because the parents don't attend a class, and once children are grown, many parents stop coming altogether. But who can say "there's nothing left to learn?"

Something else that's kept us strong in every area, is a commitment to be there for one another, to "hang in there," for God and one another, to keep on giving our gift, because that's what it means to be a family of faith, living and glorifying God together, as grapes on God's vine. How are we doing? I guess we each have to ask ourselves. I know I see wonderful signs of commitment, bearing, and sharing of burdens, people giving one another strength to keep on keeping on, for God, one another, and all the rest of us. But also at work is the consumer culture's mindset, which looks at everything in terms of "what I'm getting out of it", so that when things get difficult or disappointing, there's little will to persist.

The last thing I'll mention, is what's always most challenging – money. As Martin Luther said, it's always the last thing in us to be converted, the last thing we admit comes from God, belongs to God, and is entrusted to us to be used for God and God's family. How are we doing? Again, we each have to ask ourselves. I don't know what anyone gives. I do know that every year a 1/4 to 1/3 of us give nothing. I also know that while scripture gives a tithe, 10%, as a guideline, the average total giving for Protestants is less than 3% of annual income. That would say, there's lots of reason to ask ourselves, how much we're continuing to look at money as ours, to use as we please, rather than a resource God entrusts to us for God's work in the world. The only way for each of us to know that is to look into our hearts, and at our checking account and credit card statements. That's often the best indicator of our spiritual health.

Faithfulness to God isn't easy. Choosing for God means choosing against other things.

But remember! Christ calls us friends, and you know your best friends like the back of your hand. You know their weaknesses as well as their strengths. God knows how we sin, flirt with false gods, and are harder on our neighbor than we are on ourselves. But the call remains: "Choose this day whom you will serve." Because that call's there, God welcomes us and calls us God's own. Because that call's there, God commissions us to do good works for the sake of others who need God's love as much as we do.

No matter what Woody Allen says, thank goodness our choice isn't between despair and extinction. Thank goodness we can choose to serve God, serve our neighbor, and grow together in love.

Gracious God,

For vines once pruned, now twined with leaves and the promise of wonderful fruit to be harvested,  
...we give you thanks and praise.

For the tendrils of love that twine us together as one humanity.

May we, pruned of our sins,

...shade the world with the leaves fueled by your love that the world might be one in Jesus' name,  
...we give you thanks and praise.

For the wonder of life that blesses us in all seasons and the hope we have in planting and harvesting,  
...and the promise we share that summer and winter, springtime and harvest will not cease,  
...we give you thanks and praise.

For the acceptance of your will and wisdom that acknowledges our need for pruning, we also pray.  
For your loving us enough to what to do it, we give you thanks and praise.

For the families which nurture us and the families we are now called ourselves to nurture,  
...and today, especially, for the mothers whose love and care,  
...not only nurtured and guided us but helped us to know you and your love,  
...we give you thanks and praise.

For the ministries that twine us together, with people we will not see till we meet in heaven,  
...in our giving and receiving, in blessing and accepting blessing, in care-giving and being cared for,  
...we give you thanks and praise.

For the simple blessings of our worship and fellowship, that mirror, however imperfectly,  
...the unity of the praise in heaven, and the wonder of our praise here on earth,  
...we give you thanks and praise.

We thank you for the ties that bind us together as one, with you, with each other, and the world.

For those with no connection to a church,

...for those who don't have the comfort that comes with the fellowship of love that binds us together,  
...God of love, for these we pray.

For believers in all churches, that we may come to fully live our beloved connection to each other,  
...vines from the same branch, united in Jesus Christ, God of love, for these we pray.

For women and men of good faith throughout the world,

...that by the power of your Spirit your will would be done in all the world on earth as it is in heaven,  
...God of love, for these we pray.

For all humanity, not only for those in tune with your will but for those who actively oppose it,  
...that sins may be confessed and forgiven, and that at your name, every knee should bow,  
...God of love, for these we also pray.

As a family of faith which you have drawn together and which draws its life from you,  
...we pray for those known to us with special needs.

We pray for...

Gracious God, be with all these people, in all these situations, with your presence, power, and peace.

Amen.