

- *If you choose...*
  - CHOICE. It is as American as baseball and apple pie.
    - I remember the first time I returned to the US after two years in Rome. I was on retreat and had forgotten shampoo. At 5:30 in the morning, I ran out to the closest store which happened to be a 7-11. I stood there in the toiletries aisle literally crying as I looked at the selection. There at that hour, in the smallest of stores, I had a larger selection than in the largest grocery store in Rome.
    - Yes, we love and demand our ability to make choices from color swatches to brand names to different flavors.
    - It is more, though, than what we buy and our nation is founded on being able to choose what to say and what one believes and where one lives.
    - One of the smartest (from their perspective) and insidious (from our perspective) things that the anti-life people did was to shift the focus of the abortion debate from the life of the unborn child to the right to choose. Certainly, choice must be taken in to account but overlooked is the fact that the unborn child cannot choose even most basic right of life.
    - We want choice in every area of our life and push back against anyone or anything that would limit those choices
  - And it is choice that joins our readings today.
  - Three times expressly and once implicitly, God calls us through the prophet Sirach to recognize our options and to make a choice.
  - Then, in our Gospel, Jesus speaks about 3 particular choices and the consequences of those choices for eternal salvation.

- Our responsorial psalm and Paul's letter to the Corinthians remind us that we are blessed when we choose to follow God's wisdom, blessed especially if we are faithful to that choice until the end where we will receive *what God has prepared...What eye has not seen...ear has not heard...what has not [even] entered the human heart [or imagination],*
- All of these readings taken together remind us what's at the heart of our faith: God's choice for us, our choice for God, our choice to allow God to love us, and our choice to serve God in return.
  
- *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.*
  - These marching orders of Jesus are the foundation of our discipleship and our focus on the basics of our faith.
  - Hopefully you got the message last week that God's love is at the heart of this call. God is a loving father who chooses us, cherishes us, seeks to hold us close and give us what's best.
  
- Last week, in talking about God's love, I referenced the Our Father and spoke about the intimate word Jesus used: *Abba*.
  - That single word sums up God's love for us: Poppa. Daddy.
  - God's love is given fully and freely, without hesitation or qualification, a love that demands nothing of us in return.
  - We cannot buy or earn or merit God's love. God rains it down on each of us, on all of us, whether we are good or bad.

- But, if we let the conversation end there, it's only half of the story.
  - Sure God gives us His love but we know the catch: all the things we have to do: be good, go to Mass, care for one another, even our enemies, look out for the poor and the weak and those with no voice. We may not be able to earn God's but we sure have to work for it.
  - Yes, that's true but again, only part. God's love is an invitation, an invitation to share in the delight God takes in us and wants us to take in one another.
  - God created each of us to be beautiful, talented, joyful, and peaceful, a visible reflection for others of God's image and likeness.
  - We should rejoice, then, to share in God's very life by imitating God's love, not because we HAVE TO but because we can, because we are loved and want to please our Beloved.
- Go back, then, to the Our Father. Yes, it speaks of God's love for us, but there are also other words that can't be overlooked.
  - How about the very first? "OUR." With that word alone Jesus reminds us that the love God has for us is given to everyone else as well.
    - It is not just **MY** Father; it is OUR Father. God's love for us immediately calls us into communion with Him **AND with one another**. This communion is the very life of the Trinity and the life of the Body of Christ.
    - I am not better than the other because we are all created and loved by the same Father.
  - Further in Our Father is a phrase all too often overlooked but one that should actually remind us how to treat others:
    - *Forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

- Yes, God’s love for me is communal, far more than just an individual relationship. An essential part of MY receiving God’s love is how I in turn **offer that love to others.**
- God has given us gifts and talents precisely to be used, not for ourselves, but for others.
- Again, used for others, not because **we have to** but because God’s love for us **allows us** to see the other as God does, using God’s eyes and ears and mind and heart rather than my own.
- This is not mere tolerance or non-violent cohabitation, i.e., live and let live.
- God’s seeks to create in us an earnest desire to understand and **to value** the other, to look beyond the superficial: color, class, religion, economic status, or citizenry, and to see the other also created and gifted by God, even if **I** find this person distasteful, even if this person has not fully used those gifts.
- God’s love helps me to see the other not as a question to be answered, a problem to be solved, or a challenge to be dealt with but a sister or brother I can accompany on the journey of life and, just as importantly, who can accompany me as well.
- God’s love for all and for each one of is why we must think differently about so many issues today, issues like immigration or health care reform. Jesus elevates the other in today’s Gospel as worthy not only my service but my thoughts as well.
- We are connected to one another. Jesus, in His generosity with me, reminds that my gifts are to share **with the other** and the gifts of the other are shared with me, that I can learn from and draw from the other, for my good and for that of the other.

- Here's another reason why Alpha is so important.
  - Alpha brings us together around a table, a shared meal. There's a reason why Jesus did so much of his ministry at meals.
  - There's something about coming together and sharing over a meal, even and especially as we learn about Jesus Christ.
- Our dependence on God and our inter-dependence on one another is also why I hate the phrase "God never gives you more than you can handle."
  - Too often this gets misunderstood, as if I have to bare every one of my hardships because somehow God thinks I can handle it.
  - That phrase can only be truly understood when I think of myself not in isolation but in relation to others who can help me share my load. The reverse is also true: my gifts may be what another needs to carry a too-heavy burden.
- This awareness of who I am with God AND who I am with the other is humility, an ever-present awareness God's love for me that calls me beyond myself to serve the other. It's not always a drudgery to be endured for the Kingdom. Sometimes my service of the other is as much for me as it is for the other.
- It is not easy, though to reach out like that. In fact, it's pretty scary loving those who are difficult or different, those who challenge us or are angry.

- This is especially true in this day and age of those who think differently, act differently, even vote differently, those who ARE IN FACT DIFFERENT, or still greater those who turn down our love or challenge us even for offering it.
- But our refusal, our **choice** to refuse to love others, actually hurts us by limiting how we receive God's love
- If like the scribes and the Pharisees Jesus condemns in today's Gospel, we are all too convinced of our own righteousness, all too concerned with our own efforts, what we have done well, where we have succeeded, then we don't allow God to pull us outside of ourselves and beyond our comfort zone.
- We can't fully receive God's love for us because we don't share the gifts we've been given.
- Now I can't tell you I'm there yet or that I do this easily.
  - In fact, some of the biggest battles I have are when God calls me to look beyond the opposition I have received from one who doesn't like me or doesn't agree with me or challenges me.
  - God's love calls me to see the other differently, especially the one I find difficult, to be more patient, to enter more deeply into a relationship, to be less shallow, to be more gentle, to stop judging according to my own standards and use God's. Unfortunately, I often lose the battle on all fronts.
- But, as Saint Paul reminds us, God's wisdom is not ours.
  - God forgives and strengthens us to choose once again, this time for the other, aided by the Spirit, filled with God's love.
  - It's not easy but it's God's heart for us, the heart of our discipleship and what must be our heart as well.
- **Now, let's go make disciples.**