

"Open Hearts"
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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Choice – 'My momma always said, "Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.'" These now famous words are from the movie "Forrest Gump." We have many choices in life. If we had to make all of the decisions by ourselves, it could be somewhere between tricky and a disaster. But we have been given many tools in life to help us make our decisions.

If you are a new gadget person, like myself, when you see it on TV it looks very intriguing, or even 'as wonderful' as it is advertised. But if this is how you do your shopping, it is at least a good idea to do some more research, rather than jumping right in on impulse and buying right away. Some of the tools that seemed like such a good idea at the time, don't always turn out to be so useful and may sit in a drawer or closet more than being used.

There are tools for our entire decision making process. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in the 1700s, categorized them into four parts: Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Using these tools help us to understand how we come to our decisions. Because we are all raised with different experiences, the decisions may not be the same, even when our traditions, our reasoning and our Scriptures are the same.

Some of us here have the same United Methodist traditions, but not all of us; and even within our Methodist churches we find some variances in the tradition. When we reason, we understand that we don't all think alike, though when I know that I have rationalized things out to make sense, I am sometimes confused that not everyone else has come to the same conclusion as the one I have.

You would think that scripture at least, would be standardized for all of us. But even the Holy Word is interpreted in many different ways. So then how do we decide what choice to make?

Gloria wanted to be a right and proper person. She worked at the Library, dressed everyday in a professional skirt and blouse, which was impeccably ironed before being put on. She especially liked her job because it was filled with proper order – 'Everything in it's place.' As often happens, she had a close friend who was just about opposite.

Her friend, Olivia was an artist, a painter, most often she could be found painting late into the night and sleeping most of the day away; Hair full of bits of paint, in colors that hinted to her latest project, and a half-hazard way of life.

She was currently working on an almost life-sized picture of the Locomotive in the town square - a 4884 Hudson from the Union Pacific Railway; the painting was for the community's bicentennial.

Gloria wasn't the artist, but she thought the style looked Picasso like. The canvas filled the 12 foot high, 20 foot wide studio and like Olivia's personality, you needed a tall ladder to get to the top!

Gloria always went to bed at 10pm, just after the news. So she wasn't ready for the call that came at 3 am. Olivia was at the hospital with a broken ankle from a fall that happened when she tried reaching way up beyond the 8 foot ladder. "Could Gloria please bring her the orange robe and the pink fuzzy slippers as soon as possible – and some chocolate!"

The robe and slippers were easy to roundup at Olivia's place, but where would she find the chocolate that early in the morning? She stopped at the all night drugstore and bought a box of chocolates in a big red heart.

Olivia was thrilled about the arrivals, and quickly put the robe on over the hospital gown, one slipper on all of the way – the other to dangle from her toes. Then with a squeal of delight she ripped the beautiful cellophane off the box of chocolates, pulled off the top and began to examine the different chocolates. Remembering her 'bearer of gifts' she tentatively, reluctantly offered the box to Gloria first. "No thanks" came the reply, "not even maybe at 4 in the morning."

Olivia just shrugged and continued examining the selection. Her eyes lit on the square one just left of the middle. She lifted it, scratched the bottom, frowned and replaced it in the box. She then did the same procedure of hunting for the ones she wanted, eventually popping 6 or 7 in her mouth before Olivia rolled her eyes and decided it was time to leave, thinking to herself – "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

Life is filled with choices: What we will wear, where we will work, who we will call friend and how to decide which chocolates to eat. We surround ourselves with the people who will lift us up when we are down and guide us through the tough times and laugh with us in joy and celebration; People that we can listen to for advice. You respect and honor others when you ask and listen for their opinions, but still the choices are ultimately yours to make.

The book of Deuteronomy is a recording of the words given through Moses to the people on their journey from Egypt through the wilderness. Today's section of scripture are some of the final words for the people before they left Moses behind to enter the Promised land. Here Moses gives them an invitation to choose: Life and prosperity, or death and adversity.

The choice seems simple. Wouldn't we all like life and prosperity? Yet that may be the tougher journey for each of us. We have to work for life and prosperity. Sometimes we can't decide which decision will lead us to life and prosperity. The world may tell us that this or that gadget will get us there. Our desires may point us to a different kind of life and prosperity. But the wrong choice could lead us to death and adversity.

Consequences - Life is filled with choices and with some of them the end results aren't readily apparent, though we often have clues if we are making the right or wrong choices before the choice is made. Our lives are continually bombarded with 'quick fix solutions' that don't really get us anywhere.

Not wanting to admit we have made a mistake we even sometimes eat all of the chocolates of life that we don't really like – thinking it is better to dig ourselves deeper than to quit while we are ahead. We can't seem to turn down an offered cookie, we can't seem to leave food on our plates.

But have you noticed that the portions have grown in many restaurants? Have you had to face yourself as part of the growing population that is overweight? Or have you had to face type 2 diabetes? I have, and it is not a happy place. Consequences of my former eating has put me on the road to adversity and death. Not just physical death, but also a death of the joy and energy I could have if I had made better choices.

Verse 17 & 18; ¹⁷*But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,* ¹⁸*I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.*

Even so, when we have made a wrong choice, we can turn around to another choice. We repent by acknowledging that we were headed in the wrong direction, and we want to change. Christ came to remind us

of Moses words. Christ died to save us from ourselves. Christ rose to assure us that God is always waiting with a better choice in new life.

Choose Life -"Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." But we can decide if we will eat the whole chocolate once we find out we have made a poor choice. If you will follow God, God will bless you. But we hear similar promises from the infomercials. We also hear promises from a world that would try to convince us that their promises of happiness, through wealth are the Promised Land.

We are encouraged to spend money to help build up an economy that continues to flounder and head in a deeper deficit directions. Then some find themselves drowning in credit card debt way over their heads.

But we can choose life. God has given us instruction for our decision making. We can choose which chocolate we will taste first. We can choose which directions we will follow. We can choose once we have scratched the bottom, which choices we will change. Though turning around and changing our ways sometimes means giving up some of the things we thought we had to have, and that is difficult work.

Open your hearts - If we scratch your heart what would we find inside? Would it be marshmallow - soft and fluffy, easy to enter? A place where others can find the love they need from you? Or would it be caramel – sticky and chewy or maybe too sweet? A place that gathers everyone to you, afraid to let go? Would we find a nut? Hard and at first unyielding, but with a texture all its own?

Or is there dark chocolate within? Not bitter, but not so sweet? Maybe you aren't out of that box at all...maybe you are a left over conversation heart, with a word to be spoken to others about the tools you have found to make the right choices in life. Each of us is a mystery to each other, until we at least scratch the surface. Yet no matter what we have within us, we all have the potential to follow Christ on this journey, moving toward God.

-"Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." In this season of hearts, like Moses I stand before you with similar words: Open your hearts to God. The Creator already knows what is in there. You can't hide from God, but if you choose life, there is nothing to hide. Living a life that is open to God is filled with blessings. Find in the scriptures a design for your heart, both in physical health and peace of mind.

Open your heart to the people in your lives. Not just the ones you've chosen, but the ones who enter your life by chance. They may be the one with the right tools to help you make the choices ahead. Often the way we share our hearts with the ones we love during a holiday is to feed them: Pumpkin Pie for Thanksgiving, cookies at Christmas, candy for Valentines Day; out to eat for anniversaries and Ice Cream Cakes for birthdays.

As receivers, none of us wants to offend those in our lives with too sweet or sweet tooth hearts, so we cave in to them and eat, and eat and eat. This holiday and for the rest of the holidays this year, I invite you to consider the gift of opening your hearts to God, and then having a heart that can be a tool for decision making for yourself and for the people you love. Use your heart to choose life.

And if you get a box of chocolates as a Valentine this year – go ahead and scratch the bottoms and savor a couple, while you ponder –

'Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.'