



Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time August 23, 2015 B

Help with Difficult Decisions

In today's first reading and Gospel, some people are being challenged to make an important decision. In the first reading, Joshua, Moses' successor, challenges his people to choose between the God of Israel or the gods of their neighbors in Canaan. Addressing the gathered assembly, Joshua tells them: "*Decide today whom you will serve.*" Then, by way of example and not by coercion, Joshua announces to the assembly: "*As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!*" This is not only a decision in favor of the Lord but a beautiful image of a leader setting a good example for his family and people to follow.

In the Gospel, people are also faced with an important decision. Jesus has just concluded his long discourse on the Bread of Life in which he tells the people that he is the Bread from heaven, and that if they are going to inherit eternal life, they must eat his body and drink his blood. Such cannibalistic words are too much for many people to grasp—including some of Jesus' own disciples. They ponder: "*This saying is too hard; who can accept it?*" We notice that Jesus makes no attempt to water down what he has said. John then says: "*As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.*" We can only imagine the impact their *decision* had on their lives.

Life is full of decisions

From the time we get up in the morning until we go to bed at night, we make many decisions. It has been said that we are the sum total of our decisions. *Whenever we make a decision, we are writing another line in the script of our lives.* Daily, we make all kinds of decisions that impact our *health*, our *relationships* (with others and self), our *character*, etc. Daily, we make decisions on how to use our *time*, *treasure* and *talent*. Some decisions can have some very long-term effects on our lives, e.g., choice of career, whom to marry or not to marry, etc. Other choices can be very traumatic and difficult, as in the following instances. Should the expectant woman who discovers that her preborn baby has some serious physical or mental defect, carry the child to full term or terminate the pregnancy? Should the woman who has had a very difficult pregnancy be open to having another child?

Should one stay in a marriage that is loveless? The decision to place a loved one in a long-term nursing facility is heart-wrenching. Equally painful is the decision to withdraw the life-support system from a family member who has no hope of recovering. We might say that nothing impacts our lives more than the *decisions* we make, especially the difficult ones and those with far-reaching effects.

When it comes to the difficult decisions in our lives, most of us would like to be able to pick up the phone and dial God so we could ask him what choice we should make in the particular situation we face. Often we feel that there is a conflict between what we think is good for us and what God wants for us. That is not necessarily true. We can always assume that God *only* wants our happiness and what is best for us. In John 10:10, Jesus tells us that he has come so that we may have "life in its full abundance." Spiritual directors like to point out that what we most deeply desire in our hearts is also what God wants for us. The difficulty is getting at what we most *deeply* desire—a whole other topic.

Five suggestions for dealing with difficult decisions

Suggestion #1. Pray for guidance and openness to whatever God may ask of us. In some situations, this will be very hard because our minds and hearts may be set on a particular direction. For example, if a married man falls in love with another woman, he will most likely find it very hard to hear God calling him back to his wife. Because I like Ascension parish very much, I would find it hard to hear God calling me to another place. Our *attachment* to a particular place or relationship or job would usually make it very hard for us to have what St. Ignatius calls "interior freedom" when it comes to discernment or decision-making. In other words, how *free* are we to go in whatever direction *God* may point us? Probably not very free if our minds and hearts are set on going in *one* particular direction. Of course, the direction we have in mind may be the direction that God also wants for us. So as we face some difficult decision, it is very important that we not only pray for guidance and openness but also for *inner freedom*.

Suggestion #2. Take a piece of paper and jot down the pros and cons of possible options available to us. When I was invited to consider coming to Ascension parish, I

was quite happy with my previous parish and had no desire to leave. But I knew that I needed to pray for the right decision. One of the steps I took was identifying the pros and cons of why I did and did not want to come to Ascension. In doing so, I quickly realized that all my reasons for wanting to stay where I was were somewhat selfish. So after praying a little more, I recognized that God was calling me to pull up roots and move south. I'm glad I did. In drawing up our list of pros and cons, it might be a good idea to enlist the help of others. Sometimes we may be blind to aspects of the dilemma we face that other people may otherwise see quite clearly.

Suggestion #3. Take time to pray with our list of pros and cons. As we sit with each side of an issue, we can check how we feel. We may want to stay with one side of the issue for a few days, after which we can assess if we feel good about it or if peace is lacking. This step demands a lot of honesty, especially when we have a strong attachment to one particular option. As we struggle with our decision, it would be helpful for us to distinguish how we feel *during* prayer as opposed to how we feel *outside* of prayer. Oftentimes, the doubt and confusion we feel occurs *outside* of prayer. We would do well to trust more what we think and feel while we are in prayer and most open to hearing God's voice.

Suggestion #4. Discuss your decision with others. We could talk to friends who know us well and are willing to tell us what they truly think, and not what they think we want to hear. We may want to speak with a counselor. What is important is to talk and listen to someone who will be *objective* with us.

Suggestion #5. Go through three imaginative exercises recommended by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits.

- First, consider what advice we would give to another person faced with the identical situation. It would be interesting to see how clear our situation becomes when we picture someone else in the same boat.
- Second, imagine ourselves being on our deathbed and asking which route we would have taken.
- Third, picture ourselves standing before God on the last day and consider what decision we would like to have made in such circumstances.

The latter two suggestions are pretty heavy ones but perhaps they might awaken us to the seriousness of our decisions.

Decision time

Finally, we have to make a decision of some kind. Our decision may be to take more time with the issue, placing it on hold for some time, or we may decide to go in one

particular direction even though we are not at all sure that we are making the right decision. St. Ignatius counsels us not to decide while in doubt. (The assumption here is that we are in a position to wait.) The next step is to *act* on our decision. This can be a difficult step.

Acting on what we decide

Sometimes we can be quite clear on what we need to do but we may find it very hard to do it. For example, family members may decide that they need to confront the abuse of alcohol but they may find it extremely difficult to do what they know in their hearts is the right thing.

In our hearts, we know the right thing to do is to forgive someone who has hurt us but we may have a strong inner resistance to taking that step. Here we need to pray a lot for the grace to do what we do not feel like doing. Here prayer is crucial. We should pray for the grace to do what we believe is the right thing.

As we carry out our decision, we may wonder some months later if we made the right choice. One way to check is to ask ourselves if our choice brings us peace and is life-giving for us. Of course there may be days when we experience a lot of conflict and struggle, and wonder if we really made the right decision. Such difficult days and feelings are normal and do not necessarily prove that we made the wrong decision. As I just said, if our decision gives us a sense of *peace* and *life*, then we have two good reasons to believe that we acted in accord with God's will. On the other hand, if our chosen direction gives us little or no peace and drains the life out of us, then there is reason to believe that we may not have made a good decision. This raises the difficult question: what if we discover or believe strongly that we made the wrong decision? If we prayed about our decision and made an honest effort to seek God's will, we can be very sure that God is pleased with us. As in everything else we do, the *art* of good decision-making is developed by trial and error, and of course with the grace of God. It has been said that there is only one real mistake, and that is the one we keep repeating and learn nothing from. The Lord does not ask that we always be right; he only asks that we try our best and act out of the best understanding we have of a particular situation. Our God is so creative that he is always "writing straight with crooked lines." Some of our best lessons are learned in the detours of life's journey.

If you know someone facing a difficult decision, consider sharing this column with them.

Have a blessed week,

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