

Choose This Day

Pentecost +13

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Deuteronomy 30:15-30, Psalm 1, Philemon, Luke 14:25-33

In 1996, I was 15 years old, and the movie *Trainspotting* had just arrived in the United States. I probably should not have seen it at 15, but one of my friends in my circle wanted to see it because she had one of those teenage crushes on Ewan McGregor. The story revolves around a group of Scottish heroin addicts and their exploits, for both good and ill, in and around Edinburgh. One of them gets a tip on a major shipment of the drug, and they decide to pool their money and sell it, making a vast profit. I won't tell you what happens, because that would spoil it.

At the beginning of the movie, Ewan McGregor's character gives this opening monologue; "Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical can openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear, and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suit on hire purchase in a range of fabrics. Choose DIY, and wondering who you are on a Sunday morning. Choosing sitting on that couch, watching mind numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, messed up brat you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life. But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose something else. And the reason? There are no reasons."

Renton, Ewan McGregor's character, gives this monologue partially as a response to a nihilistic consumerism the movie intends to critique, and partially a way of explaining the life of drugs, death, and copious amounts of swearing you are about to witness. But the reality is this; Renton really doesn't have a choice. He correctly, I think, sees a choice between the opiate of consumerism, or an actual opiate. Either way, the movie seems to say, finding joy through purchasing three-piece suits and big TVs, or joy through heroin, you end up in the same spot, simply rotting away at the end of it. So why not choose the fun one?

Too often we see the near infinite choice that our modern consumerism provides as the thing that gives life. In fact, we have such a wide variety of choice in our lives that it can be difficult to sort out what options we even want. As an experiment, I went to amazon.com and typed in, "Trainspotting book." You see the movie was originally a novel. I received over 1,000 results on that choice, on that search. I could get a hardback, I could get a paperback, or I could get a Kindle version. Or I could have the cover with the movie poster, or I could have the one with just Ewan McGregor. I could choose between *Trainspotting* the novel, *Trainspotting* the Blu-ray, or even a book about *Trainspotting*, the hobby where people watch and look for particular types of trains. I could even have Ewan McGregor read the book to me as an audible download.

These choices, though, are not life giving, because ultimately the choices are false. Remember when iPhones and iPods first came out? How many selections of colors did you have? Anybody remember? One. They were all white. And then we had two, we had black or white. Now we have five; graphite, gold, silver, sierra blue, and alpine green. I'm expressing my individuality, we say, by buying a green iPhone that is completely indistinguishable from any other iPhone, or Android, or a Galaxy.

Our Old Testament reading places before us the true choice, the choice of choices. Having delivered the Law to the Hebrews via Moses, having delivered the Israelites themselves from destruction at the hands of Pharaoh, God places before them a choice; living according to the Law, according to the wisdom of God, and live, or choose death. It's framed as following the Lord that brought and delivered them, the Lord of the people of Israel, or chasing after other false gods, other false laws. Now you would think a people who had just seen the sea part, seen the Commandments delivered from Mount Sinai, who would then see a pillar of fire or a pillar of smoke, leading them to the Promised Land, wouldn't chase after iPhones. I mean false gods. And yet the entirety of the Old Testament is taken up with this basic tension, the choice between following the Lord who delivers from death, or the lords who deliver to death. Time and time again, the Israelites make the choice for death, and then we read it and we get snotty because who would choose that?

It's important to remember that when we read about the Israelites, we are not simply reading the chronicles of a bronze age tribe, we are reading about the church. About me, as I read to you, this sermon, from an iPad. I'm not even sure what color it is now that I think about it. It's about me, it's about you, it's about all of those who, having been bought with a price, and having been brought through the waters of baptism, are given a law from our Lord and are now given the same choice; follow the Lord who delivers from death, or follow false lords and their false promises.

"Choose our life," they say. Choose the life we've picked out for you, and updated by Renton in the sequel. "Washing machines, cars, fixed interest mortgage payments, an iPhone made in China by a woman who jumped out of a window. Choose Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and a thousand other ways to spew our bile across people we have never met. Choose looking up old flames, desperate to believe they don't look as bad as you do. Choose unfulfilled promises, and wishing you'd done it all differently. Choose never learning from your own mistakes. Choose watching history repeat itself. Choose the slow reconciliation towards what you can get rather than what you always hoped for. Settle for less, and keep a brave face on it. Choose disappointment and choose losing the ones you love, then, as they fall from view, a piece of you dies with them, so you can see that one day in the future, piece by piece, they will be gone, and there will be nothing left of you to call alive or dead." Choose life is what they say.

The Gospel is this: there is a way out of this. There is a way out of the false choice of the opiate of consumerism offered by the demons lurking in our culture. And it's very, very simple. Give it up. Give it all up. Give up the washing machine, give up the car, give up the fixed mortgage interest payment, give up the social media, give up the old flame. Give up your own life for someone else. Give it up. Die to self, and live. As Renton puts it to his still heroin addicted friend, Spud, "You're an addict, so be addicted." Be addicted to something else. Be addicted to Jesus. Be addicted to serving the lowest of the low. Be addicted to healing the sick and the broken hearted. Be addicted to prayer. Be addicted to loving one another. The way of Jesus. The cost that following the Lord that delivers, that it costs us. The way of Jesus. The cost of following the Lord that delivers is that it cost us the life that all the detritus of existence in the 21st century promises.

Saint Charles de Foucauld, an early 20th century Roman Catholic saint, knew this cost. Growing up in an upper-middle-class French family, and receiving a substantial inheritance from his grandfather, Charles lived a life as an adventurous and dashing cavalry officer for the French colonial army in North Africa. He received postings in Algeria, Tunisia, and in Palestine, and

became something like an early version of Indiana Jones, embedding himself into the local tribes, learning their language, their history, and their geography. But a slow conversion led him to take the habit as a Trappist monk, and later left that monastery and entered the desert as a hermit. He ended up founding a community in the Algerian desert, praying, celebrating mass, and ministering as servants to the Tuareg tribes in North Africa.

Then on December 1st, 1916, bandits broke into the hermitage with the intention of kidnapping Charles. The bandits were interrupted by two local French soldiers, and a startled 15-year-old Bedouin shot Charles through the head. His mortal remains were entombed in an oasis, but his immortal remains, that of The Little Brothers of Jesus, stretches out on every continent, as they lived in small communities of two or four, working and administering directly in their daily lives and work. Jesus offers us this stark of a choice; life or death. Choose this day. Choose to follow the Lord, or follow some other lord.