

## Why We're Here

Gene McAfee  
 Faith United Church of Christ  
 Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
 March 11, 2018

“We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works,  
 which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” – Ephesians 2:10

When did you decide to be who you are? Or to put it another way, What decisions have you made over the course of your life that have now made you?

That's the way decisions work. We commonly think that we make them, but in fact, they make us. I read somewhere, perhaps in our Lenten study book, that we are the result of the decisions we make, for better and for worse.

Common sense and a moment's reflection tell us this. We had a wedding here at the church a little over a week ago, and in that ceremony two people declared publicly their decision to spend the rest of their lives together. Next to the family we're born into, the family we create when we say, “I do” is the most important family we'll ever know, and the decision to make that family with this person or that person is the most important decision most of us will ever make. That decision will have ramifications that none of us can completely foresee and that will shape the rest of our lives

And divorce usually doesn't change that fact. Three friends come to my mind immediately who are no longer married to the person they first married, but they remain in a relationship with their ex-spouse because of the children from their marriage. Those children will bind those two people together, to greater and lesser degrees, for better and for worse, for the rest of their lives. Children are the decision that can never be undone.

And for the relatively few of us who decide not to marry, that decision is equally momentous. There is a type of companionship that we will not experience, no matter how many or how close our friends and family are. There are very practical benefits written into our laws that we will not receive. The advice and counsel that is near at hand for committed partners we have to seek elsewhere. There is enormous freedom and opportunity in being single, but like all things, being single has its price.

So we do know, in fact, that we are the product of the decisions we make. Life may feel like a script – “Of course, you'll go to college,” “Of course, you'll get a job,” “Of course, you'll get married,” “Of course, you'll have children,” and so forth – but the fact of the matter is those “stages on life's way” as Kierkegaard put it, are decisions we make; and none of us should make those decisions as a matter “of course.”

We used to begin the marriage ceremony by reminding the dearly beloved that marriage is an honorable estate, and “therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly,” and one of the reasons I continue to insist on at least three sessions of premarital counseling for couples who ask me to marry them is so that when they arrive at the front of this church they do not do so unadvisedly.

The book we're reading for our midweek Lenten study, The Book of Joy, makes the point, again and again, that joy is a choice. We choose to have joy in our lives – or not – by the ordinary, day-to-day

choices we make that seem, at first glance, to have nothing whatsoever to do with joy.

When we wake up in the morning, what do we think about first? Is it a thought that brings us joy, or a thought that at least opens us up to the possibility of joy, or is it a thought that makes us want to stay in bed? What we choose to think about is, in fact, a choice, and when we make that choice consciously and repeatedly, it becomes a habit. And when we live with our habits long enough, they become second nature to us, which is why we should be very careful of the habits we form.

What do I have to look forward to today? is the second question I ask myself every morning when I wake up. The first question is much more pedestrian; it's simply, "What day is it?" and once I've oriented myself in time, then I can ask the second question. And it's the second question that frames the day in such a way that I open myself up to the possibility of experiencing joy, no matter if it's Sunday and church or Monday and my sabbath or Friday and the chance to try to get it right in another sermon. I haven't always asked myself that question about looking forward to something when I wake up in the morning, but I do now, most days, and it makes a very real difference in the way I go through my days. No matter what I have to clean up from the cats or the dog when I go downstairs or how many emails are waiting for me when I sit down at my desk or how much snow I have to shovel to get out the driveway, when I take just a few minutes at the opening of the day to find that thing or those things to look forward to, every day then becomes colored positively and contains something to look forward to. Time is no longer neutral; it's a positive gift from God for which I am always grateful. Starting each day by asking what I have to look forward to is simple, obvious, easy, and, for me at least, it works.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus, he reminded them that they were who they were by virtue of the decision they had made to become followers of Jesus the Christ. It was a life-changing decision that had enormous consequences for their futures. It was the same decision Paul had made, and it made both Paul and his fellow Christians at Ephesus who they were. As Paul says in this morning's text, "We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (2:10).

You and I, as Christians, have been created in and by Christ Jesus. We do not create ourselves Christian, and no one is born a Christian. Like members of the Mafia, Christians are always made. We are made Christians first through the sacrament of baptism, and then through the ordinary, day-to-day decisions we make. Being made a Christian is a two-step process, and, like the ceremony that marks the beginning of a marriage, the ceremony that marks the beginning of a Christian way of life – baptism – is quick and the Christian way of life is long. I say to the kids who come to me to be married, "Getting married is quick; being married takes a lifetime."

A Christian way of life works the same way. At some point in time – at baptism in some branches of our tradition, at confirmation in others – we make a conscious and deliberate decision to live as a follower of Jesus the Christ, and then, with every day that follows, we have opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to live into our Christian identity. Time, for a Christian, is not neutral; it is a gift from God that is an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Every time we open our eyes in the morning we have the opportunity to live into our identity as a follower of Jesus the Christ. Every encounter we have with other people is an opportunity for us to live as Jesus showed us how to live. Every moment in God's creation is another opportunity for us to live more fully as the Christ through whom all things came into being and who lives in us.

A day for a Christian is not twenty-four hours; a day is an opportunity. A day is another chance to be the child of God that God has created us all to be. To be a child of God implies relatedness, of

course, but it implies more than that. It also means that there should be a strong resemblance between the child and the parent, as there always is in the natural world. Gail Yusko showed me a picture the other night of her granddaughter, Clare, beside a baby picture of Melanie, Gail's daughter and Clare's mother, and the resemblance was astonishing. Barb calls Clare "mini-Mel" because the resemblance is so striking. Many of us look at Clare and we see Mel.

When people look at you, children of God, do they see your heavenly parent as clearly as we see Mel when we look at Clare? If they don't, then ask yourself, why don't they? What is it about your way of life – your words, your deeds, your deportment, your engagement with the world – that keeps people from seeing the divine when they see you? You do bear, after all, God's image. Can people see it when they look at you? Have you allowed God to make you the real you, the you that clearly shows who your heavenly parent is? Isn't that why we're here?

In the Baptist church of my childhood we used to sing a hymn, "Let Others See Jesus In You." That's very good advice. In this season of Lent, ask yourself the question, Do others see Jesus when they look at me? and if the answer is no or I'm not sure or maybe or well, some of the time, perhaps, then ask yourself another question: What am I going to do about it?