

Proper 23 Year A
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

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One of my favorite movie scenes of all time
is from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Indy, the famous archeologist and adventurer,
has been searching for the Holy Grail,
the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper,
which legend says has amazing healing powers.

Now, coerced by a couple of Nazis
who have shot and seriously wounded his father,
Indy makes his way through a series of booby traps
and at last emerges into a chamber
that is guarded by a knight,
who has been kept alive for 700 years
by the power of the grail.
Inside this chamber is not one cup, but many.
The true cup of Christ is hidden among many false ones.

“Choose wisely,” the old knight warns,
“for while the true Grail will bring you life,
the false Grail will take it from you.”

So Elsa, the female Nazi, says “Let me choose.”
She looks around at all the different cups,
and she chooses one made of gold, with a lot of jewels on it.
She hands it to Donovan, the male Nazi,
who says “Oh yes. It’s more beautiful than I ever imagined.
This certainly is the cup of the king of kings.”

He proceeds to fill it with water,
makes a toast to eternal life,
then takes a sip.
All is well for a few seconds.
Then he gasps, and begins to age incredibly quickly.

Before our eyes, he turns into a withered corpse,
 falls over, turns to dust,
 and the dust is blown away by a gust of wind.
 And the camera pans back to the knight who says,
 in a classic understatement,
 “He chose ... poorly.”

Now it's Indy's turn to choose.
 And he asks himself,
 which of these cups would have belonged to a carpenter?
 And so, bypassing all the fancy gold cups,
 he chooses a simple wooden cup.
 The knight nods in agreement.
 “You have chosen wisely,” he says.
 Indy takes the cup, fills it with water and rushes back to his father,
 thereby saving Sean Connery's life.
 What a great movie, and what a great moral teaching.

Our lessons this morning, each in their own way,
 are getting at the same moral teaching.
 Each of our readings challenges us to orient ourselves toward God's way,
 to follow God's path
 rather than a path of our own making.

As John Calvin says,
 the human mind is a factory of idol making,
 and whether our idols are golden calves
 or guns or the national anthem or consumerism or the latest iPhone,
 these are all grounded in ideologies
 that put our interests ahead of God's
 and ahead of the well-being of others.

Our problem is that too often
 we ask ourselves the wrong questions.
 As the movie illustrates,
 instead of asking what cup a king would drink from,
 we should be asking what cup a carpenter would drink from.

I read a really fascinating piece in the *Washington Post* last week,
 written by Eric Barker.

Barker is the author a new book with a marvelous title:

“Barking Up the Wrong Tree:

The Surprising Science Behind Why Everything you Know about Success is (Mostly) Wrong.”

That would be a good title for a sermon, wouldn't it?

Yeah, I'd like to hear that sermon.

Anyway, Mr. Barker has studied ancient wisdom literature, and he believes he has distilled its insights down into five questions that can help us make good decisions, help us to choose wisely.

The first is a question to ask yourself when you can't stop worrying.

When worry is nagging you, step back and ask,

“Is this useful?”

Most worrying isn't.

But you get to decide what you're going to invest time thinking about.

If the worry is reasonable, do something about it.

If it's irrational or out of your control, let it go.

Next, Barker says, is the anger question.

Anger comes from entitlement.

We feel we're entitled to something,

and if we don't get it, boom, we get angry,

and maybe we spout off and say or do things we later regret.

So when we're caught up in anger, Barker suggest we ask ourselves,

“Does the world owe me this?”

It's a trick question,

because of course the world doesn't owe us anything.

It's all about reasonable expectations.

We're not *really* entitled to a stress-free commute,

so there's no sense getting angry at all the traffic on Wadsworth Boulevard.

It is merely something to be dealt with.

As are most of the things that make us angry.

When we're dealing with loss or disappointment

a third question to ask is:

“Must I have this to live a happy life?”

Chances are, no.

It really doesn't take much to make for a happy life,
and there are lots of ways to get the things that do.

Here's question four:

"Is this who I want to be?"

We get to decide who we're going to be each day.

So I can decide to be me on my best day.

What would my best self do?

What would my idealized version of myself do?

Do that.

Finally, here's a question to ask

when we're dealing with someone who is being difficult,
who is clearly NOT being their best self.

We run into people like that all the time.

So ask yourself,

"Have I ever felt that way?"

Whatever they're going through,
we've probably felt something similar.

So be compassionate.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians,

expresses pretty much the same philosophy that Barker writes of.

He doesn't share specific question to ask ourselves,
but rather tells us how to frame our internal deliberations.

"Whatever is true,

whatever is honorable,

whatever is just,

whatever is pure,

whatever is pleasing,

whatever is commendable,

if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things."

Scholars call Paul's letter to the Philippians his "happiest letter."

This is certainly not the grumpy Paul we see in the letter to the Galatians.

But here's the ironic thing:

Paul is writing these words from prison.

He's under a death sentence for preaching the gospel,
for disrupting the empire and its values.

He's not writing it on a good day
when everything has gone well
and he's surrounded by friends
and he's feeling like the king of the world.
He's quite possibly looking at the end of his life.

His joy comes from a deeper place.
It springs out of his knowledge of,
and his relationship with Jesus Christ.
And the joy that he knows in Christ can't be contained.
It spills out.
Even in the face of imminent death,
Paul is joyful.

He wants to encourage this little flock in Philippi
to share in this faith that he has.
And the words he speaks to the church in Philippi
apply just as well to churches today.
Especially the small ones.
The ones who might be feeling overwhelmed.
The ones who might be looking at the empire all around them,
and hearing a message that is very different from the message of the gospel.
The ones who may be discouraged
or confused
or disheartened at what they see happening.

Paul's words are both stirring and gentle:
Rejoice.
Don't worry.
Pray.
The peace of God will guard your hearts.
Keep on doing the things you've learned and received.

Yes, there are a lot of cups out there purporting to be Christ's.
There are a lot of false idols out there
that many people have mistaken for the real thing.
There's even a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth going on.
But don't succumb to worry.

Rejoice in the Lord always.
Choose the higher path.
Choose the humbler cup.
Ask the right questions.
And remember that even in such a time as this,
there is cause for joy.

Hear, oh, hear our supplication,
blessed Spirit, God of peace!
Rest upon this congregation,
with the fullness of thy grace.

Amen.