

MAUNDY THURSDAY | APRIL 14, 2022

EXODUS 12:1-14 | PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26 | JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

About fifty years ago, Edward Packard was trying to get his kids to sleep when he stumbled into literary fame. Many nights, Packard would try to get his three kids to sleep by telling them stories about a fictional character he made up named Pete. But before too long, he started running out of stories to tell. So he started asking his kids what they would do at pivotal moments in the story. And he would make up a story about what the character would do based on his kids' choices. Eventually, he wrote this complex web of contingent stories down into a manuscript and submitted it to a publisher under the title *The Adventures of You on Sugarcane Island*. This turned out to be the first choose-your-own-adventure novel.

As any 90s kid can tell you, the appeal of the choose-your-own-adventure novel was two-fold. For one, they felt kind of like life. What happened in the story changed depending on what decisions you made. You weren't just active as a reader but as a character. But there was another part of the appeal, too. If you ever made a wrong choice, you could always just back up and choose a different path. The first feature captured the fun of life. And the second feature felt like an escape from life's predicaments.

Hannah Arendt called that predicament "irreversibility." To live a life with agency, the ability to make choices and act in the world, is a gift. But the gift carries a burden. Because as soon as you start acting, making choices, deciding how to proceed, you end up changing the world around you. And life isn't a choose-your-own-adventure novel where you can test out certain ideas and go backwards if they don't work out. Once you start changing the world around you, things never go back to the way they were.

Faced with the consequences of our choices, sometimes we choose to do nothing. Not to act. To be so scared of making the wrong choice that we choose to avoid any choice at all. Think of how often we avoid pursuing goals or projects or relationships not because they're not worthwhile. But because we're worried that we might do something wrong in the process. And sure, choosing not to act means not making mistakes. But in the process of not making any mistakes, you don't do a lot of living.

This question of choices and their consequences becomes sharper during Holy Week. All week, we hear stories about what happens when the actions of the disciples, the crowds, and the leaders come under scrutiny. How can we live together? How can we go on living and acting even when we know our decisions won't always be right?

And tonight, the focus turns to the disciples. In tonight's gospel reading from John, Jesus gathers the disciples together and washes their feet. He loves them. And, here's the important part, he tells them to love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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The defining characteristic of this new community will not be their ability to make perfect choices. It will be their ability to love one another. And that love will require learning how to forgive. They will mess up. They will deny Jesus. They will betray him. They will fight. And so will we. But, Jesus says, those choices aren't a dead end. There is always love and forgiveness. And as long as this community is able to forgive each other, love one another, and serve one another as the Holy Spirit empowers them to, it will be in communion with him.

Jesus creates a different type of community. One freed from the predicament of the trap of irreversibility. Forgiveness is reassuring and pleasant and all the rest. But it is also—to use the language of tonight's image from Exodus—liberating. It opens up new possibilities where there weren't any before. It creates a new people. A new way of being in the world. Forgiveness doesn't undo the past. Nothing can. It acknowledges the past, it remembers it, it addresses it. But it prevents us from becoming beholden to it. To use Arendt's phrase, it prevents us from becoming "victims of its consequences." Forgiveness gives us the possibility of going on living. Of acting. Of making choices. Of pursuing our reverent best guess in the service of God and neighbor. Knowing that even when we make the wrong choice, there is still the possibility of being held by grace on the other side.

Forgiveness might be a liberating gift, but that doesn't mean it's entirely comfortable. It can be challenging to ask for forgiveness. To be honest, I'm sort of curious to hear how this individual rite of confession and forgiveness was for you. I imagine some of you found it sort of uncomfortable. The words are fine to say in a group. But saying them individually can be difficult. It makes you vulnerable.

And God knows it can be difficult to forgive others. Of course, it can be difficult to forgive when people commit horrendous acts. But even trivial offenses can be difficult to forgive. Who among us hasn't gloated privately when someone wrongs us just so we can retain our feeling of superiority?

It feels good at first. But it closes us off from one another. And it becomes so difficult to move forward when our sense of self comes primarily from our own righteousness (We don't need forgiveness.) or grievances (I can't forgive others.). It's almost like reading a choose-your-own-adventure novel where you have fewer and fewer choices.

But in this community marked by love and forgiveness, Jesus frees us from our cycles of resentment and grievance and smugness. He offers us another way forward. A way marked by love. And service. And the way of the cross.

Jesus doesn't give us the ability to go through life without making mistakes. Or hurting people. Or deluding ourselves. But he promises us that eternal life always remains a possibility. History is still irreversible, but it need not be irredeemable.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor