

“CHOOSING JESUS IN A STARBUCKS WORLD”

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Matthew 4:1-11

March 10, 2008 / National Presbyterian Stewardship Conference

Being a parent has given me some small perspective on the God’s view of his children. That’s because children, like grown ups, have minds of their own. With minds of our own, we like to do what we want, not necessarily what others want.

Which is why I am usually a grim failure when I order one of our kids to do something. “Because I said so” only raises their hackles and my blood pressure. Since ordering a kid to do something rarely works, I often resort to persuasion. It is far better to be persuasive than bossy.

And if persuasion doesn’t work, well, try being sneaky. Stealthy. Underhanded.

Try offering choices. When we want our six year old son to do something, we give him a small number of carefully crafted choices. We honor his autonomy – he still gets to choose – but we funnel his behavior by narrowing his options. Let me illustrate.

Kids really must bathe. Bathing is good. Nonetheless, our son thinks bathing is a waste of time. We have stopped growling that “it’s time for a bath, and like it or not, in five minutes, you had better be in the tub. Or else.”

This approach does not work.

Here is another approach. “Wow,” we say. “You’re such a big boy, you get to choose. You can decide for yourself to take a bath, or a shower. Which do you choose?”

This method really works. Sometimes. But other times, Ian looks at us and says, “Television.” “Corn dog” makes the occasional appearance.

That’s how it goes with kids.

We give him option A or B, he chooses C. We offer C or D, he opts for F.

That’s how it goes with humanity.

God sets us amidst countless choices,
focuses our attention on decisions which are life-affirming,
choices which are community-sustaining,
and sometimes,
still,
we choose option C.

Religious people have long pondered this human impulse to multiply our options. Explaining this impulse lay at the center of the creation story. Or creation *stories*. There are two creation stories, of course.

In the first, in Genesis’ first chapter, God orders the chaos. In neat, sequential steps, God brings what was disparate and tangled and places them in lovely order. Then, on the seventh day, pleased with the garden and all that surrounds it, God rests.

In the second story, the one in Genesis’ second and third chapters, humanity has a bit more personality. God has created the world such that human being may live safely, and joyfully, with one another and with God. That human beings are to live within boundaries is clear; God places in the garden a tree. My son Ian might call that tree option C. It is on the other side of the parentally filtered options. What God has ordered and given in joy, humanity wants somehow to reach beyond. By reaching beyond the choices, Adam and Eve tilt the cosmos back towards chaos.

That’s how it goes with humanity.

God sets us amidst countless choices,
focuses our attention on decisions which are life-affirming,
choices which are community-sustaining,
and sometimes,
still, we choose option C.

Or at least we are tempted to.

Temptation is the allure of choices outside God's intentions for us.

Even Jesus was tempted.

Like our ancestors before him, Jesus retreats from the city and its choices and withdraws to the simplicity of the desert.

Like Noah's family, floating forty days atop the waters, rising above the complexity;
like Moses and the Israelites, meandering forty years in the desert, remembering again that only God provides reliable options;

Jesus confronts his temptations when he removes himself to simplicity.

Someone said once that he wasn't certain who discovered water, but he was pretty sure it wasn't a fish. The most obvious temptations are often too subtle to be noticed when we are surrounded by them. We see them only from a distance. So Jesus retreats to confront his temptations. They are three.

To turn stones to bread and feed hungry people.

To throw himself from the temple, creating a public display of God's protection, just the credential he needs to bring attention to his message.

To rule the world. Imagine the good to be done with such power.

We think of temptation as the devil sitting on our shoulder, beguiling us to evil, pulling us towards immorality. This isn't what happens with Jesus. Jesus is not tempted to evil. Jesus is tempted to *compromise*.

Each temptation he faces is to a worthy thing. Which is precisely why such options are tempting. Feeding hungry people, teaching attentive crowds, wielding political power for good – most would jump at the chance. Any of them. But none of these roles completes the incarnational promise.

Jesus' temptation is to be good enough,
to meet *people's* expectations (but not God's).

So Jesus does a striking thing:

Jesus limits his options.

He reduces his choices.

The incarnate Christ minimizes his alternatives.

If he is to be completely faithful, there are options no longer open to him. *Feeding* the world, *ruling* the world, *dazzling* the world, they are no longer options. For Jesus has come to redeem the world.

This temptation story is common to Mark and Luke's gospels, as well as Matthew's. It is that important. The Bible is teaching us something about the characteristics of temptation.

It is the nature of the human heart to broaden its autonomy.

We long to enhance and to extend our freedom.

Our instinct is to increase and widen our options.

Yet it may be, paradoxically, that unbridled choice actually limits us. Unbounded options may be, in fact, spiritually debilitating.

Barry Schwartz has written an insightful little book. It's called *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*. The book's central thesis is that our consumerist society has produced so many products between which we may choose that we are becoming paralyzed by complexity. Faced with so many choices in the marketplace, we are intellectually frozen.

Because it is in our nature to broaden our autonomy, to extend our freedom, to maximize our choices, you would think that more choice will make us happy.

It doesn't. Survey after survey demonstrates that Americans are not as happy as they were forty years ago. Schwartz argues that the complex matrix of every day choices has conspired to reduce our happiness, to make us uneasy. He argues that such extensive choice makes us question our decisions, even before we make them. It gives us unrealistically high expectations. It can come even to make us blame ourselves for our failures.

And, paradoxically, too much choice leads us to feel out of control.

Which is counter intuitive, isn't it? We assume that greater choice leads to *more* control. After all, if one has only two choices, it's hard to think that she has much control. If she had fifteen choices, why, then she would have a greater sense of control. With so many options, exercising her autonomy would lend itself to a sense of mastery and control.

But it doesn't work that way. Schwartz summarizes an overwhelming consensus of social science research that shows that the greater the options, the less the sense of control.

Yet we continue on, producing more products, offering more options, pursuing ever greater variety.

I have a friend who visited Blockbuster Videos one night. He had no particular movie in mind when he entered. He would browse, then choose. Thirty minutes later he left. Empty handed. He was paralyzed by the options.

Have you visited a grocery store lately and surveyed the variety of breakfast cereal? Tooth paste?

Do you remember the simple days when Baskin Robbins ice cream bragged about its 31 flavors? 31 flavors? How quaint!

Have you visited Starbucks Coffee? Here's what Starbucks's homepage brags:

*"When you consider our milk options, number of shots, various syrups and the choice of whip or no-whip, we have up to 87,000 different drink combinations – all customized to your own individual needs."*¹

All customized. Individual needs.

Shouldn't that bring happiness?

My niece recently graduated from college. She doesn't know what she wants to do. She's preparing to take the LSAT and the MCAT. She doesn't know if she wants to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or either, so she'll take the tests. Whichever test brings the higher score, she will pursue.

Her car sports a bumper sticker. It says,

"I took the road less traveled. Now, where in hell am I?"

All customized. Individual needs.

Shouldn't that bring happiness?

Is someone in your family wading through the dizzying array of Medicare pharmaceutical options? Is it bringing them happiness?

And let us not think that the religious world is immune from this ubiquity of choice.

I had a friend in college who bragged that she was christened Catholic as an infant, baptized Baptist as a teen, and in college was studying Judaism. She wanted to be prepared to go to any direction when she met her husband.

In this post-denominational world, many people choose churches like we choose cars. We find a church that meets our needs. If it comes not to, we trade it in for another church.

What is interesting is that churches which seem best at marketing religion as product – and then growing! – are also the churches likeliest to present a religion of reduced choices. They simplify the gospel. They reduce faith to a bare and narrow spectrum. As Schwartz puts it, "conservative denominations ... are attractive in part because they limit the choices people face in other parts of their lives."²

I don't want to emulate these churches. Yet, I wonder if their numeric success is partially explained by their giving people tools which reduce the number of options in a complex world.

Speaking of increased choice in pursuit of personal control, have you scanned our denomination's catalogue of designated mission recipients?

If temptation is the allure of choices outside God's intentions for us,

is it possible that one of modern life's chief temptations is

the impulse to create more choice than it is good for us to have?

Is it possible that our choice

to create choices

actually distracts us from God?

Let us pray.

Holy God, from chaos, you bring order.

From complexity, you bring clarity.

As you have chosen us in Jesus Christ, help us to choose you, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ http://www.starbucks.com/retail/nutrition_info.asp.

² Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, New York: Harper Collins, 2004, p. 40.

Matthew 4.1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

⁴But he answered,

“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him,

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus said to him,

“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him,

“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰Jesus said to him,

“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.