

I can't say that I ever anticipated doing a sermon about the sea diving women of Korea in the 1940's but here we are. This wholly lies at the feet of one of the women in my book club because she chose a book about it, and while I was expected a book about, well, sea diving...what I have gotten is a painfully bleak book about the reality of life in Korea in the post-World War II, pre-Korean War era. And I'll admit, this is an era of history that I know little to nothing about and the education is vital, but man do I know things now that I just wish I didn't know.

I'm not going to get into all of the nitty gritty details but the heart of the conflict in this book lies in the push and pull of which authoritarian regime is going to be in control, particularly on this island which lies south of Korea but is still considered part of South Korea proper. There are local Koreans on the island of Jeju who are labeled as rebel insurgents who are trying to fight for their own independence and freedom from military rule. There are American powers in place who are controlling elections and the military, and then there are Korean members of the military who are trying to choose not necessarily the right side, but the side of survival, and are doing what they have to in order to just make it through the chaos.

In the midst of all of this military and political turmoil, the reality is, *life* continues on. People have to eat and work and take care of their families

and watch out for their kids and figure out how to function in this world gone mad. At one point, the military orders everyone who lives in the center of the island in the mountains to evacuate, demanding that everyone must live within five kilometers of the coast. As a result, what are essentially refugee camps spring up in every town. At one point, our main character is walking down to the shore and a woman in one of these camps pleads with her to take her to the shore and teach her to dive for food for her family. It turns out she doesn't even know how to swim so this is a non-starter, but Young-Sook is faced with a decision. Here is this woman, a woman just like me, with kids who are starving, surrounded by terror and fear, what should I do? She knows that if she is found to be helping her and this woman's family is labeled as rebels, well then she will also suffer for being a collaborator. And yet...this woman is starving. She has done nothing wrong that she knows of, and she just needs food. Young-Sook decides to give her directions to her family's fields and tells her to come at night where she will find a basket of sweet potatoes and other goods waiting for her.

The arrangement doesn't last long because eventually the military discovers families are doing this for the hungry and they immediately squash it with violence and fear, but in that initial moment, Young-Sook has to make a choice. Do I help this woman even if it could get me in trouble or do

I walk away knowing I could have helped, but was too afraid, too focused on my own survival to do anything I could for my neighbor?

If there is a theme for the lessons this week it would be that one word: choices; it runs rampant throughout all three texts. Deuteronomy finds the Israelites on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. The wilderness wanderings are almost over and rest is within reach, but God, through Moses has a few words of advice before those final steps. God tells them that what lies before them are two choices, life and prosperity or death and adversity, and the way to make that choice is by either following God's commandments or not. Simple, right? Well, the rest of the Old Testament and the resulting exile will prove no, not so simple. For sure, they know the commandments, the life God calls them to, but the actual *doing*, the actual *following*, not as simple. The margin notes in my bible said that the choice is uncomplicated, and on the face of it, yeah, it should be...however...

We move to second lesson where Paul lays out a choice for an old friend. Paul has met this man's slave while in prison. Onesimus has been put in prison by Philemon for some reason we don't know, but now, Paul has brought Onesimus to faith and wants Philemon to make a choice. You are a man of faith, this man is now your brother in faith, will you leave him here or will you have him released, and not only released but freed? Will

you welcome him back into your home not as a slave, but as a brother, as a member of your family? Will you live out the faith I have passed on to the both of you that you now share? Seems simple...however...

And then Jesus just ups the ante. In the wide world of allegiances, there can be no other choices. In the wide world of discipleship, you can choose nothing over God. It sounds extreme...hating mother or father is a big yikes, but Jesus knows human hearts. Oh yes, we will follow you Jesus, but we gotta go do this thing first. Oh yes, sign me up for discipleship 101, Lord, but I can only do it on these certain dates, at these certain times. Oh yes, I love you, Jesus, but I also love...all of this... Can't I pick both? This is at least one choice that doesn't give the illusion of simplicity, even though, honestly, in God's eyes, it probably should be.

Every single day, we are faced with choices. Sure, maybe they don't seem as stark as the ones laid out here, but the stakes are the same, we just try to ignore that, because we prefer when faith is a *part* of our lives, not the centerpiece, not the North Star. We prefer faith to influence the parts we want it to influence and then go sit on the back burner when it seems like it might make things too messy. And none of the lessons today are interested in those kinds of caveats. They aren't interested in the messy, the

complicated, the caveats, the well buts. The choice that is laid out is in fact simple by their standards, will you live by your faith or not?

And let's face it, the world we live in does not make this kind of choice easy, because every single day we are assailed with all the reasons why the things our faith calls us to are wrong or unworthy or complicated. In the scenario which played out in my book, the choice would be simple based on these terms—you do whatever you have to to feed your neighbor. But of course, our world would say, yeah well, but there are jobs everywhere, so they should be able to feed themselves. Or umm they have a job so they shouldn't be hungry, when that job is working as a server and making well below minimum wage because tips should cover it, when each of us knows our own tipping practices. So, yes, we need to feed our neighbors, because we all know how much food is sitting in our cupboards that will end up getting thrown out because it expired.

When we watch the news, our faith is like ooook, time to move to the back burner. We watch the situation playing out in Gaza and we're like well, but everything is so complicated and the dynamics of global politics and allies and who fits where, when all that should matter is that children are starving, suffering, dying at the hands of political chaos. Children are having to throw their own makeshift graduation ceremonies because they

can't get to school safely. Their lives matter, regardless of if they're Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or agnostic. No one should be dying because people just want more power. We worship a God who sent Jesus who died at the hands of Empire, but we want to mental gymnastics our way into why God would be ok with any of this, because it fits our own political agendas.

The very idea of inclusion and welcome, well that just gets everyone fired up when it comes to choices and faith. Shouldn't there be people that we exclude? Shouldn't there be people we ask to change or hide before they come here? And suddenly we're all experts on the Old Testament and Greek translation of specific words. Suddenly, Jesus' whole thing about giving a new commandment that we should love our neighbors as ourselves and ya know his whole life of eating and drinking with everyone, reaching out to the lost, lonely, and stigmatized goes out the window or at least has a lot of astericks next to it.

We claim we want everything to be simple and uncomplicated, but when God literally lays it out for us and says, I did!! Jesus came and forgave *everyone*, loved *everyone*, and then told y'all do to the same thing and we're like wellllllllllll but it's complicated. It's complicated because we make it so, not because God did, but because we did, because we want it to be, because complicated gives us a whole myriad of excuses for why we

can exclude some and not others, why we can ignore where faith is calling us, or at least pick and choose how we live it out. Literally across our lessons, God says, choose life and prosperity, choose giving life back to another person and loving them for who they are, choose God above all other allegiances. Those are simple choices, and we are constantly like but you just don't get it God, here's why we can't do that, and then we wonder why everything feels so hard, why we can never quite get over the hump of feeling truly at peace with the world, because I'm not sure we want to. If we chose those things, love, acceptance, care for neighbor, putting God first, well then what would we fight about, what would we get to judge others about, how would we know that God loves us more than them then?

The world is complicated enough, faith doesn't have to be, love doesn't have to be, welcome doesn't have to be. And every single day, God gives us a choice to make it simple. Feed your neighbor, welcome the stranger, love the unloved, listen to the ignored, stand up against injustice, speak out when you see harm. And we want to say, but that's God's work to do. Yes, it is God's work. It is God's work in the world, however, it is our hands that are called to do it. In the wide world of choices, choose love over hate, choose peace over angst, choose simple over complicated, choose grace over vengeance. Choose God. The end. **AMEN!!!**