

Sermon Title: **“Choose Life”**

Bible: **Deuteronomy 30:15-20 & 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**

When: on Sunday, February 12, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, we come to you as we are. That’s because we are immature, and we are weak. That’s because we want to grow in your grace and love. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. “Two Jurisdictions Tackle Racism in Bishop Elections”**

Last November, our denomination, the United Methodist Church, elected, welcomed, and celebrated many new bishops. In the U.S., The United Methodist Church is divided into five areas known as jurisdictions: Northeastern, Southeastern, North Central, South Central, and Western (ours). In our United Methodist Church, bishops are elected by the lay and clergy delegates in each regional area (jurisdictional and central conferences). I read this news article from [umnews.org](https://www.umnews.org), which is our official source of comprehensive information and news about the United Methodist Church.

Its title was “2 Jurisdictions Tackle Racism in Bishop Elections.” Can you guess what the two jurisdictions were? One of the two was the Southeastern Jurisdiction. Where is the Southeastern Jurisdiction? It encompasses nine states in the U.S. South, and it has fourteen

annual conferences. According to the article, most of them have struggled with the legacy of the enslavement of Black people and the Jim Crow laws. The Rev. Sharon Austin, a Black candidate from the Florida Conference who withdrew, said the election process “is humiliating.” The Rev. Sharon Bowers, a Black candidate from the Holston Conference, urged the conference not to fall under “the tyranny of the white gaze” as she announced her withdrawal. The Southeastern Jurisdiction formed a task force to study the impact of racial bias in the nomination and election process for bishop candidates.

And what is the other jurisdiction? The other is our jurisdiction, the Western Jurisdiction. Our Western Jurisdiction covers Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Guam, and other territories in the Pacific region. Racism in our Western Jurisdiction? Unfortunately and sadly, racism still exists even in our area and in our time. Normally, the Jurisdiction highlights the celebration and joy of having new bishops. But not this time. Even before our jurisdiction elected any bishops, the following statement was announced, after a highly unusual closed session: “In our Western Jurisdiction space, racism, sexism, and homophobia have all been experienced. We commit ourselves as Annual Conference Delegations and as a Jurisdiction to address these with transparency and consistency so we can become an inclusive church. We repent from the harm that has been caused in our midst, in our system, and the harm that we ourselves have caused. We repent from participating in sinful rumors and repent of the ways in which we have allowed them to dwell within our body. We affirm now, and will continue

to affirm, our Episcopal candidates— those who are no longer in process and those who are – they are beloved children of God. As we review their qualifications, we recognize the abundance of gifts and graces among them all. We believe that they are going on to perfection, and we commit to spurring them onward. Be blessed and be a blessing... Rev. Bradley Laurvick (he/him) Secretary, Western Jurisdiction.”

## **2. Conscious & Unconscious?**

One sad news item from the South and East. And another sad news from our area, the West, California. How does it make you feel? Can we understand that even in our church we experience racism? Can we accept the unavoidable truth? Can we confess our sin? Can we repent of our sin? We thought that we were open minded. We thought that we welcomed everyone. We thought that there was no discrimination. We thought that there was no racism. We thought that we were perfect. But we are not perfect. We are going on to perfection.

When we Baptism, the first two questions are the following: “On behalf of the whole church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?” “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” Can we resist whatever forms evil, injustice, and oppression present themselves in? Can we resist whatever forms racism, sexism, and homophobia present themselves in?

In our consciousness, we might be spiritual people. But in our unconsciousness, we could be infants, according to the Apostle Paul’s description in today’s scripture reading of 1st

Corinthians. We might need more milk, not solid food yet for our growth. More gentle love and grace.

Mihyun and I went to San Francisco to watch a Korean movie. After watching the movie, we needed to go to the parking lot. The parking lot had an elevator. When we needed to get in the elevator, there was a black couple also waiting to get in. Somehow, my foot did not move. In my body, there was an ice, a tension, and a fear that I could not understand. My brain told me to get in. But my body, my feet did not listen to me. Even though it was a very short moment, I noticed that the black couple also hesitated to get in. It felt like a long time. Finally, we got in and they got in. But there was still ice in the elevator. The black couple broke the ice by asking us what movie we had seen. We shared what we had seen, and we also asked what movie they had watched. It was another short moment, but this time, there was no more ice, no more tension, and no more fear. It was a blessed moment of mercy and grace. It was like a moment for infants to be fed with milk. Can I still be your pastor?

I realized that in my unconsciousness, there was something there. Like the cultural iceberg, there was something under the surface. To face those invisible and hidden truths under the surface is not always pleasant. But we are growing day by day. There has been a lot of uncertainty and unknowns. There have been a lot of mistakes and faults. Nevertheless, we have been growing day by day, through the love of our parents, families, friends, neighbors, and most importantly, with the love and grace of our Lord.

One day, I received an email from a funeral home. A family was looking for a Methodist pastor for the funeral service. Because I am a Methodist pastor, and because I was appointed to this church and this community, my response was, “Yes. I will be there!” I talked with the funeral staff on the phone about where and when the service would be. I also talked with the family on the phone to learn about them. Because their loved one had passed away at the end of the previous year, they felt they could not welcome the new year! It could not be a happy new year. I gave another call to them to prepare the service. I wanted to know how I could help them to celebrate life at the service. But they did not answer my phone call. So, I left a voice message. While waiting for their call back, one of my church members gave me a call, who had introduced me to the funeral home as a Methodist pastor. What I learned was that the family had found another pastor for the funeral. Probably, my English was not understandable enough for them. When I talked with them on the phone, I thought that my English was okay except for the moments when I shared my Korean name and its spelling. Well, I am a Methodist pastor appointed to this church and this community. I am a Korean who speaks English as my second language. Can I still be your pastor? Can I still be a Methodist pastor for this community? Thanks to your presence in accepting me as your pastor, this church is still my church, and this community is still my community for me to serve.

I would like to share one more story. We welcome every visitor to our church, right? How about me? Do I welcome every visitor? One Sunday, an Asian visitor came to our worship

service. Another Sunday, the same Asian came to our worship service. And one more Sunday, and on and on. And one Sunday, another different Asian came to our worship service. After the service, this person asked for help to pay the rent fee. Then, can you imagine what happened to me at that point? I remembered that this person came twice before to ask for help to pay their rent fee. Now, I started to think that the first Asian came from the same family and was ready for this moment. I thought and felt that I had been taken advantage of. First, I needed to take care of the favor. What we could do was not to pay the rent fee, not to give cash. What we could do was to give a Safeway gift card for grocery shopping. So, I gave the gift card from my pastor's discretionary fund. Second, I could not hide my disappointment in regard to the first person. But you know what? They were not from the same family. Based on their appearance, I was judgmental, and I was wrong. This person came to our worship service, to worship our Lord, to be loved by God and to love God. What was there in my unconsciousness under the surface? I am so sorry. I am so sorry for my bias. It is my fault. Can I still be your pastor?

### **3. Moses' Last Address**

The other scripture reading is from Deuteronomy 30. It was Moses' last address to the Israelite people, before they entered the promised land. What Moses said is to choose life. What is life? When God liberated the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt, for some reason, the people complained many times to Moses and God, and they wanted to go back to Egypt. They missed their lives of slavery. Was there a life for slaves? They did not want to face new

challenges and something unknown and the uncertainties in their unconsciousness. They did not want to accept freedom. They did not want to take responsibility. From Egypt to the promised land, this happened not once, but many times. “Leave us alone. We wanted to go back!” Could we understand them? When we face many challenges, when we realize our hidden faces and shameful moments even from under the surface, what is our response? Do we want to face them? Or do we want to put them back again under the surface, and ignore them? Or do we want to rationalize our misunderstandings and biases?

To ignore them, not to face them, and not to grow might be more comfortable. But don't we have life in us? We are to live. The breath of life is in us. Let us breathe in and breathe out. One more time. Breathe in and breathe out. Let me breathe in, and hold. ... I want to breathe out and breathe in. I want to live a life. I know that it is not easy to live in this broken world. I know that to face our bias is not comfortable. To close our eyes and ears would be easy and comfortable. To resist evil, injustice, and oppression is difficult. But I know that it is worthy to accept the freedom and power God gives us and to take responsibility to resist! Moses chose life! I will choose life. Because our Lord Jesus Christ is the life, and Jesus Christ is in me. How about you? It is your choice. What is your choice?

### **Closing Prayer**

O Lord, thank you so much for your love and grace in our lives. Thank you so much for your guidance and protection. Even though there are many challenges and unknowns, we are

growing day by day. That's because God loves us, and because we love you, Lord. Please be with us, and lead us to choose life! Amen.