

For or Against?

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Over and over again, in John's Gospel, we run into individuals having to make decisions. As one reads through John's story of Jesus sequentially, we run into one situation after another in which an individual – or individuals – are asked...or invited...or challenged to make a decision. Take the first chapter of John's Gospel, for example. In the paragraphs preceding our scripture reading today, we find John the Baptist, remember him? Jesus's cousin. John, that peculiar, prophetic preacher - the guy who made a fashion statement out of camel skins and leather belts. The guy who championed a diet far more challenging than Whole30 – a diet of locusts and honey. The guy who wandered around the Judean wilderness along the Jordan River, exhorting the crowds that flocked to hear him that they needed to make a decision – they needed to repent – to turn from the wrong and turn toward the right. To turn from a self-centered, selfish lifestyle to God and God's way of being in the world.

Next thing you know, we find John and several of his disciples (Andrew and Peter) making a rare visit to town. As they're loitering on the street, along comes Jesus, and John immediately, excitedly points and proclaims, "Hey guys! There's Jesus! The long awaited Messiah! The Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world! Follow him!" Rather reluctantly, John's disciples decide to do just that. They spend the day with Jesus, and their lives are never the same! Jesus turned their lives upside down. He'll do that, you know!

Fast forward to today's reading (yep...we're still in John 1) and Jesus and his two new disciples have moved on to Galilee. And there they run into a guy named Philip. Jesus immediately says to him, "Follow me." Jesus is asking Philip to make a decision! Thank God Philip decided to follow the Lord. Next thing you know, in his excitement, Philip takes off to find his brother, Nathaniel, and excitedly invites him to make a decision, to "come and see" Jesus. Well, not everyone wants to "come and see" Jesus. Nathaniel didn't. He initially chose not to accept his brother's invitation, instead countering with the snide remark, "Jesus? From where? From Nazareth? You know that 'nothing good can come from Nazareth.'" There you have it! Some folks decide for Jesus...others don't! But the decision is "for" or "against" – plain and simple.

And so it goes throughout John's Gospel. In John 3, Nicodemus, the religious leader, encounters Jesus by night and he, too, is asked to make a decision. In John 4, the Samaritan woman at the well encounters Jesus. And she is called to make a decision. Later on, her whole village is asked to make a decision "for" or "against" Jesus. Incredibly, these hated Samaritans, so-called "outsiders" make a decision for Jesus! And the stories keep piling up in John's Gospel, with the fundamental question asked

over and over again. Will you, will I, decide “for” or “against” Jesus? Today. Throughout this day. Tomorrow and the next day and the following day. It’s an ongoing question, an ever present decision. What would Jesus do in this situation? What would Jesus say to this or that person I just met? How would Jesus respond right now? Will I be and act and talk like him...like Jesus?

The German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger often used the word *Geworfenheit*, translated as “thrownness.” What in the world did he mean by that? Well, it means that all of us as human beings, when born, are “thrown” into a world, a lived universe of nationality, class, gender, race and so forth that we have no control over. A world not of our own choosing. A world in which we must learn to navigate the challenges of life – everything from hardship, suffering and frustration; family ties; social conventions and moral obligations. Life’s vicissitudes, the hurly burly of everyday life, require that we make decisions.

Heidegger noted that the way we respond to life’s challenges, the decisions we make in life, form our identity, form who we become. And our decisions can lead us to an “authentic” life, or an “inauthentic” life. This *Geworfenheit*, this “thrownness,” means that we are constantly confronted with decisions, with making choices throughout the vicissitudes and vagaries of life.

“Well, give me some examples,” you say. OK. Think of the young woman athlete, a tennis player, on the cusp of a promising career. Suddenly she has a severe injury – her career and dreams are over. How will she respond? What decisions will she make? Or consider the young man who has dreamed of a life of service as an officer in the military, of serving his country, who upon testing is informed that he has a physical condition that disqualifies him for service. His dreams, his identity, are shattered in an instant. How will he respond? What will he decide to do with his life? Or the young parents, eagerly expecting the birth of a child. Tragically their hopes and dreams unravel and fall apart through a miscarriage. How do they pick up the pieces and move forward? Perhaps you see yourself as a parent – that’s at the heart of your identity – and when the kids finally leave the nest and you find yourself all alone at home you experience a crisis of identity. What will you do now? Traumatic injury or illness hit a family and alter its planned life course forever. A deathly pandemic descends, out of the blue, and all our lives are changed, instantly. You get the picture. We are all thrown into life and must make all sorts of decisions...decisions that can lead to an authentic or inauthentic life.

As one theologian points out, famed biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, used Heidegger to develop “a Christian existentialist account of human existence” based on the Gospel. (1) No wonder Bultmann was especially drawn to John’s Gospel, for as John’s story of Jesus unfolds, individual after individual encounters Jesus – in town, along the

road, in the darkness of night, beside a well, in the wilderness, and so forth. And every one of these encounters with Jesus demands a life-changing decision – “for” or “against.” Some, like those first disciples and the woman at the well, decided for Jesus, while many others did not.

As Bultmann works his way through John’s Gospel, he creatively interprets these encounter stories in light of Heidegger’s distinction between “authentic” and “inauthentic” existence. Those who reject Jesus “refuse to recognize themselves for what they really are: creatures dependent on God for their well-being and salvation...Such individuals seek to justify themselves by trying to secure existence through moral actions or material prosperity. This attempt at self-sufficiency is ‘sin.’”
(2)

Against that inauthentic mode of existence, those who say “yes” to Jesus, recognize the illusion of self-sufficiency and instead trust God’s sufficiency. “Instead of clinging to transitory things for security, followers of Jesus place their trust in God. Instead of trying to justify (or save) themselves, they learn to recognize that God offers us salvation – full and free – accepting us as we are. Instead of denying the reality of our human finitude and the inevitability of death, followers of Jesus recognize that these have been faced and conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose victory becomes our victory through faith.” (3)

Talk about “authentic existence!” I cannot improve upon John 10:10 that underscores the fact that Jesus “came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.”
Abundantly! Not simply in some far off heaven in the future, but right here, right now, on earth. So the question is...are you “for” Jesus or “against” Jesus? Will you give your life to him, or follow some other lord? The choice is mine...The choice is yours! Amen.

Rev. Rich Darr

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(1) Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p.147-148.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.