

Choosing life is harder than we think

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“Choose life,” the prophet says. Choose life over the deadly ways of lesser gods. Choose life over all that shines, sparkles, and glitters. Choose life over what you possess and over what possesses you. It sounds so easy and desirable. Sure, until Jesus comes along and names the cost right out loud. If we truly choose life, we have to let go of everything.

Years ago I had a therapist who told me that the choice to live or die was mine. She told me that I could choose to continue the self-destructive behavior patterns of my eating disorder and die, or I could choose to change my thoughts and behaviors and live. She made it sound so simple and so enticing. I wanted to choose to live. What she didn’t tell me is that it would be hard and it would be the background music of my life. She didn’t tell me how many things in the world would conspire against my choices, especially when I chose life.

During my second semester of college, I did start making healthier choices. However, there was a cost. Instead of focusing all my energy on food and the powerful cycle of starving, binging, and purging, I had to face the depression and trauma that led me down the eating disorder path. It was ugly and painful and I didn’t want to deal with it. It was so much easier to “feel fat” than it was to feel pain, fear, and sadness. It was easier to run ten miles than it was to face the feeling of worthlessness that pursued me. It was easier to romance death than to embrace life. Embracing life meant accepting that the past could not be changed and that I had value as a human being, as a child of God. It also meant letting go of pain, anger, and fear. I had to let go of the very thing I thought defined me. Would people see me, recognize my suffering, if I weighed more than 100 pounds?

Choosing life was risky. I had to learn that I was more than a painful bundle of eating-disordered thoughts and behaviors. I had to stop paying attention to the hypercritical voices of self-hatred that had protected me from the intense pain of my childhood. Choosing life meant stepping out of the safety I had constructed and set out, instead, on a path that would lead me to discover just who it is that God created

me to be.

Those early days of recovery were hard and painful beyond the words I have to describe them. In many ways they seem so distant from the person I am now. In other ways, they are closer than yesterday. Strangely enough, I'm still not great at choosing life consistently. There are times when the eating-disordered voices that still hum along in the back of my head get quite loud. It can take a lot of energy to ignore them sometimes. Though choosing life is bigger than that these days.

Choosing life means letting go of the protections of privilege. Choosing life means taking a risk to try to alleviate someone else's suffering and maybe getting it wrong. Choosing life means showing up to advocate for justice even when most would prefer to keep the systems of oppression in place. Choosing life means finding my own personal value without considering the numbers on the scale. Choosing life means letting go, every day, of the things I reach for to fill the empty places and define me, to make room for the Spirit to move in my life in new ways. Choosing life means sitting still long enough to hear God's voice and having the courage to respond. Choosing life means putting in the effort to live a life of love when it would be so much easier to give into the pervasive culture of anger and fear.

The problem is that these things are so hard. Jesus was pretty clear about that. Of course, he was pretty clear that while there's a cost to choosing life, the reward is greater. I wish I was better at choosing life. I wish I didn't get distracted by pretty things. I wish I wasn't so quick to anger and could wake up joyful each day. I wish I never had to quiet the voices that tell me I'm not good enough and I'm too fat. However, I've never regretted choosing life. I've only regretted the times when I have chosen lesser gods.

From days long forgotten, God has been reminding us to choose life and warning us against the flimsy promises of false gods. God has also been quite clear about the costs of choosing life. We will have to let go of everything we think makes us who we are to make room for the Holy Spirit to shape us into who we were created to be. There's nothing quite like choosing life to lead us into the presence of God. It's too bad that there is something within us that is so reluctant to run full-speed down that path. In the meantime, there is grace.

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