

“The Power of Choices”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor at Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 11/1/2

Hebrews 11:32-34

Happy “All Saints Day” or as it was once referred to “All Hallows Day.” This of course is how we arrived to the Halloween Celebration we have today, the “eve before Hallows Day.” Our daughter Mumu embarked on trick-or-treating inside the house last night with our dog Charlie. Charlie dressed as gnome and Mumu dressed up as Charlie, and they knocked on five doors within the house and we both greeted with all sorts of treats. Needless to say, both were quite content with the activities last night and are no doubt paying the price this morning with tummy aches. Now it’s “All Saints Day,” the day that is celebrated with solemnity of those faithful leaders in the cause who have passed before us. I want us to turn our attention to thinking about our own ancestors who have gone on before us, those without whom we would not be here today. Let us remember them today... OUR saints.

I think of my great, great Grandmother Hokti who crossed the “trail of tears” from Mississippi into Oklahoma nearly two centuries ago so that my family might be here today. She was only seven years old at the time and lost her entire family to a brutal winter on the trail, arriving to a new, strange land without her birth parents and without even her birth name. The Choctaws simply called her “little girl,” Hokti—which is the name she used for the rest of her life. But from her resilience would rise great people, tribal leaders, judges, and powerful women who would shape our family forever. So let us take a moment to remember our ancestors... Before the Choctaws were in Mississippi, they were the ancient people of Mexico, before the dominance of their cousins the Aztecs and Mayans, and so we share cultures that honor the dead in similar ways. However, one of the most famous tributes to this culture is in the animated film “Coco.” This tells the 20th Century story of a family in Mexico who honors their dead through the Mexican tradition of Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead) in which small “ofrendas” are set up with pictures of their ancestors and candles are lit, and the dead are invited back to their families for a short period of time, so the ancestors can feel the love of their family in the land of the living while the living can feel the love of those family members that have gone on the next life. If you haven’t seen this wonderful film, I am going to spoil the plot for you, so maybe tune out for the next few minutes. Be warned.

This story centers around preteen Miguel who loves music and loves to play the guitar and sing traditional Mexican music. However, for Miguel’s family music is forbidden, largely because his great great grandfather had chosen music over his family as a traveling musician many years earlier. This had brought a cloud of shame on the family who sought to erase his memory by forbidding music altogether. Of course this was a struggle for Miguel who aspires to be a great performer one day, bringing joy to others. Well, somehow Miguel bridges over into the land of the dead where he meets his dead relatives, and while he encounters many adventures there he helps reconcile his great great grandfather with his great great grandmother. You see, his great great grandfather, though he did leave his family for a short time to play music on the road, he was on his way back because he missed them so much when he was killed by his up-and-coming performer friend who really just wanted to take credit for the amazing

music that Miguel's Papa Hector had written. The dilemma of the story, however, wasn't about that as much as it was about Papa Hector never got to see his little daughter "Coco" again and it broke his heart. Well, Coco, now is nearly dying herself from old age and the memory of her dad is slipping away, which Papa Hector feels in the land of the dead—and as soon as Coco remembers him no more, he fades away, which isn't what upsets him. What upsets him is that he cannot revisit Coco because the family fails to put his picture up because of the anger they have passed down from generation to generation against him (and as a byproduct, anger against music in general), and so he can't bridge back to see Coco one last time and she won't be able to see him in the land of the dead once she passes into the next life either. The reasons are complicated and are hidden deep in Aztec mythology. He regrets so deeply the choice he had made as a young man to leave his family to go on tour, and now at the very end of the film he is resolved to live with this choice. I haven't given the ending away, don't worry.

The point is the power of choices. The author of Hebrews points back to some of the Israelites' greatest heroes facing incredible choices, and choosing unpopular things at times, and even making terrible choices (just think of King David or before him the great Samson). They all made bad choices at times, and good ones at other times, but one thing is clear... they had to live with those choices. Many of us feel weighted down at times knowing the costs that have been made for some of our own personal choices in life. Some of us live with deep regret and replay the words, "woulda, shoulda, coulda." But what benefit is there in that? I tell you this: choices cannot be undone from the present viewing into the past, right? But we have been told ancient wisdoms that give us calm. Remember the Apostle Paul writes, "all things work together for the good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28). I feel this is like God's "salvaging" plan. God will take the choices and begin to find intersections of goodness, things that bring about a result pleasing to the Creator and Creation: like, peace, love, unity, and hope. I also think about Paul's revelation that God's "strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). How relieving that must be for many of us, right? For those of us who get this one, while surrounded by a great number of prayers all around us that say "Lord, give me strength," it's like we've discovered a new formula and now we've started to pray, "Lord, make me weak." Like John the Baptist's revelation many years ago when he said, I "must decrease." You "must increase" (John 3:30). This is the key. This is the secret. But are we ready for this mystery to manifest itself in our lives, as humility, love, and faith?

And similar to what the author of Hebrews said about those great Israelite heroes of old, they dispensed authentic "justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames, and escaped the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength!" (Hebrews 11:33-34). God is a God of humility and mercy. Let that mercy reign in our hearts and let us not forget from those whom we descend, those who suffered in this life so that we can carry the torch forward and effect some change in this world that is positive and fruitful. So let us not ponder our missed opportunities, our poor choices from the past. Let us not dwell on our mistakes. Let us instead understand the power of our choices in this life and let us make new ones that will allow our descendants and the descendants of all those around us (that means people who don't look like you, those outside of your culture, those outside of your tribe) to all carry a torch burning brightly with lavish love, radical mercy, and extreme compassion. And may we fall in step with the prophet Micah's admonishment from the Lord who commanded him to "act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Let us walk together.