

After our service today is the annual meeting. For anyone that didn't know, I am sorry to break the news to you now. When I was a kid, I hated the annual meeting. I dreaded it every year. I didn't think that any of it mattered to me and I didn't understand why I needed to be there for it.

Annual meeting Sunday was always the longest day of the year for me. For those of you who don't know, I am *not* a morning person. I never have been. I've tried many times to become a morning person, but it just didn't happen. I'm a little better now that we have Wednesday. But, she isn't a morning person either and my mornings aren't as early as they could be.

So, waking up early on Sunday never started me off in a great mood. Then I would have to go to Sunday school. That might not seem like a lot, but this is Madrid. We are conditioned to be everywhere 15 minutes early or else we are late. So now, Sunday school isn't an hour, it's closer to an hour and 15 minutes.

Then you have a half hour break in between Sunday school and the church service, which was typically an hour. But, this was the annual meeting Sunday, and it seemed like Ira or Warren would go long on the sermon because they knew that they were going to have a full house. So now, I'm at church for around 3 hours and we haven't started the meeting yet. That's a long time when you're a kid.

Now we are starting the meeting. And we are talking about budgets and missions. And we are talking about people leaving committees and being replaced by other people. Some committees would make reports to the general congregation and others wouldn't. The meeting didn't hold my attention. I didn't think that anything that happened in that meeting directly affected me.

I didn't know how wrong I was. I didn't realize that every choice we made as a congregation influenced the direction the church went for the next year. And some of the choices that were made back then can still be seen today. What might have seemed so insignificant turned out to be bigger and some of the choices that seemed so monumental have come and gone. At the point of the choice we don't know the direction it will take.

It sounds a little strange saying that we are making choices at the meeting. At first glance it doesn't seem like we have a lot of choices. Someone asked different people to sit on the committees, we just have to approve. In this case, Sue did all of the hard work. We just have to agree. Who are we to say no to the work she did?

The same can be said about the budget. The finance committee did a great job making the budget. They looked over the previous budget. They looked at this year's spending compared to the budget. They assessed if there were any expenses that they generally would have had. They did all of this work and made the best assessment. Why should any of us question their choices?

Each choice that we make today affects each and every one of us. Each of us has chosen to be a part of St. Paul's. We have all chosen to serve in whatever capacity we can. Some of us have

chosen to be on a committee, some of us have chosen to help out with service, whether it is to be a part of the music, to be a reader, or to serve as an usher. These are all choices that influence the success of the church. What we do doesn't just affect us, it affects those around us.

One person that made so many choices that influence the direction of the church now was the apostle Paul. At the time, I doubt that he thought what he was choosing would affect a small church in a part of the world that he had never heard of 2000 years later. But, what he did know in today's reading from 2 Timothy, was that his time was coming to an end.

Paul knew that he was dying. He knew that his time was coming to an end, yet he chose to keep teaching. He chose to accept what was happening to him with his eyes open looking forward to his judgment.

The first assertion that Paul makes in his letter is that he "fought the good fight". He chose courage and determination. He chose to fight for what was worth fighting for. He could have turned away when life got difficult. But, he chose to keep fighting, even when it landed him in jail.

The second assertion that he makes is that he "completed the race". Paul doesn't say that he won the race, he simply finished. He chose to continue on the path that God laid out for him. He could have walked away at any point. But, he chose to see it through to the end.

Paul's last assertion is that he "kept the faith". Keeping the faith has two meanings as it pertains to Paul. The first is that he has chosen to continually and visibly live his life in accordance with the commandments. He had not faltered when tempted. He chose to live life as a good Christian.

The second meaning of keeping the faith is that Paul chose to share and nurture faith in other people. He chose to spread the faith and teach others about God and Jesus. Remember that his church was based on teaching the Gentiles. He is teaching people who were generally nomadic and worshiped other gods. His church was formed through hardship and yet he chose to continue.

Where would we be today if he hadn't made the choices that he made? Two thousand years later his name stands outside our church honoring the choices that he made to keep the faith and bring Jesus' teachings to the world. Honoring his fight to the very end.

But, what about when we make the wrong choices or we make choices that benefit us and not other people. What if we are on the receiving end of those choices and do not realize it?

In today's gospel reading, Jesus shares the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee is choosing to draw a line between good and bad. He is trying to show how good he is with his proclamation about fasting twice a week, giving to the temple, and how he is not

as low as the other people, the criminals, adulterers, and the tax collector. He is choosing to set himself above them.

But, in his arrogance, he doesn't realize that he isn't good, he is actually bad. Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites because they worship money and status and not God. Everything they chose is so they look better in other people's eyes and not in the eyes of God. And that is what the Pharisee in the parable has done. He is trying to look better than those around him.

The tax collector in turn chooses to be ashamed of who he was based on what the Pharisee said. He was so ashamed that he couldn't look to heaven as he prayed. But, he chose to accept who he was and presented that person to God.

Unfortunately things like that continually happen around us. People find our weaknesses and choose to manipulate them in any way they can. Some people choose to be bullies because they think that we won't stand up to them. Some people choose to take from others because they think that we won't say no. Some people will threaten to harm themselves because they think that we will do nothing because we don't want to risk it.

And they are right. Until we decide to be like the tax collector and choose to be who we are and do what is right for us, they will continue to take advantage of us. They will continue to be the Pharisees thinking that the choices they make are great and put them above all else. But, we can choose to take back their power and live as God has intended for us.

Now, I'm not saying that our choices are as significant as Paul's. But, I am saying that what we choose can have a much bigger impact than our initial intention. Thirty-five years ago someone chose to ask me to sit on the Youth Board committee and I said yes. Then the congregation approved at an annual meeting much like the one we are going to have today. That led me to becoming a trustee and serving on a search committee.

And those choices helped bring me to where I am today, back here, doing what I love, and where I love to be. Hopefully the choices we make today will continue to grow each of us and promote prosperity and well-being with St. Paul's for years to come.