

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, February 12, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; I Corinthians 3:1-9
“What does it mean to choose life???”

When I was a young teenager, many, many years ago now, I had a hero. I never met him, but I read about him in his biography, *Reach for the Sky*, by Paul Brickhill. The book was made into a movie starring the magnificent Kenneth More. I confess that I read the book so many times that it eventually fell apart.

Douglas Bader – eventually Group Captain Sir Douglas Bader, DSO, DFC – was born in England in 1910. When he left school, he joined the Royal Air Force and became a fighter pilot. He was a man’s man: he drove what we now know as a vintage Bentley, he played cricket and rugby for the Royal Air Force, and he had the reputation of being a bit of a dare-devil in the air. In 1931 he suffered a serious aeroplane crash, and as a result, both of his legs were amputated. He learned to walk on what he called his tin legs, but, despite his best efforts, was invalided out of the RAF.

When the Second World War began, Britain was so desperate for pilots that he managed to talk himself back in. He became a fighter ace, and was a pioneer in developing new aerial tactics for the defence of the United Kingdom. In 1941, he was shot down over Europe. He spent the next four years as a prisoner of war, eventually ending up in the prison for the most difficult and intractable prisoners, the renowned Colditz castle.

In 1945, Colditz was liberated by the Allies. Bader returned to the UK, and spent the rest of his life working with and on behalf of amputees. He was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen in 1976 for his service to amputees, and died in 1982 of a heart attack.

I tell you all that to tell you this. Shortly after his accident in 1931, as he lay in his hospital bed in dreadful pain, he suddenly felt the pain start to fade.

He found himself experiencing a deep sense of warmth and peace. As he lay there, he heard a nurse in the corridor outside his room telling someone to be quiet, because, she said, “A young man is dying in there.” Brickhill says that Bader’s immediate thought was, “Like hell I am!” The pain immediately started to return, even more excruciating than before.

But he lived. He survived the pain, and the years of rehabilitation, and the challenges of living with his disability and ultimately overcoming it in a quite spectacular way. They say you should never meet your heroes, but I disagree. Even today, I still wish I had had the chance to meet him.

In the words of my sermon title today, what does it mean to choose life? In Christian circles, we talk a lot about life. St John the Gospel writer says that *in (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of all people* John 1:4. At the heart of our faith lies the verse that says that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life* John 3:16. Jesus told his disciples that those who drank of the water that he would give them would never be thirsty, because that water would become in them *a spring of water gushing up to eternal life* John 4:14. On separate occasions, Jesus said that he was *the resurrection and the life* John 11:25, and that he was *the way, and the truth, and the life* John 14:6. And most vividly of all, Jesus said that he came so that people might have *life, and have it abundantly* John 10:10.

The Christian concept of life is that it is a good thing, a rich thing, something to be welcomed and embraced and celebrated and enjoyed. Which it absolutely is.

But there are times when choosing life can mean choosing pain, as it did for Douglas Bader. There are times when choosing life can mean choosing challenge, or hardship, or difficulty. There are times when choosing life can mean choosing sacrifice, or discipline, or renunciation.

Of course, there are rich rewards to choosing life, the greatest and richest reward of all being eternal life, abundant life, life God’s kingdom of

righteousness, peace and joy. But every choice we make has consequences. And sometimes we must make the choices that result in our being challenged.

Is there a mainline church in western culture that is not being challenged today? When did you last hear what you would describe as a good news story coming out of a mainline church? A story of growth, perhaps, or expansion, or exciting new developments?

Usually, and far too often, all we hear are stories of congregations struggling and declining, or amalgamating, or just throwing in the towel and hanging on with dwindling attendance and resources, until will the last person to leave please switch out the lights? I have heard these stories often enough that I just don't want to hear them any more. Because they are stories of congregations choosing not life but a slow, agonising, but ultimately inevitable death.

In a few minutes, we will move into our annual congregational meeting. I trust you have read the book of reports. You can read there of the consequences of the choices that New St James has made in the past, and of the way we – you – have sought to live out the consequences of our choices.

I believe that these reports are the reports of a congregation that has chosen not to give up, not to retrench, not to throw in the towel. A congregation that has chosen life, vibrant, demanding, satisfying life. A congregation that has chosen to live with the consequences of choosing life. A congregation that has chosen a life of living out its calling as a community of God's people through faith in Jesus Christ. A congregation that has chosen a life of following Christ, worshipping God and serving others.

Now that's a congregation to be proud of.

But make no mistake: the choice is still before us today. The Deuteronomist's words still ring out: *Choose life* Deuteronomy 30:19.