

**Hungary Mission**  
**April 2009**  
**Joshua 24:15**

Joshua 24:14-15

*"Now therefore **revere the LORD**, and serve him in **sincerity** and in **faithfulness**; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. [15] Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, **choose this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; **but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.**"*

While this morning's sermon is not a mission report, I would be dishonest if I did not say our recent mission trip to Hungary is not what is on my mind today. We arrived back in Augusta safe and sound just after 1:00 AM this morning - you will pardon me if I nod off in my own message! I want to first thank you for allowing us, by your financial and prayerful support, to go and work with missionaries, Glen and Clista Adkins in their service to the Roma gypsies and the Gandhi School. Words cannot describe how important the Adkins work is with the least of these in the Hungarian culture.

Much of our work was centered at the Gandhi School, a high school made up primarily of Roma gypsies, and we were there to teach English as a second language. Our theme for the week was about choosing, and our Biblical text that guided us was out of Joshua 24:15, "*Choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*"

During our time in Hungary, we were engaged in teaching that life – all of life – is about choices. Our very existence is not a cosmic accident and we are on a deterministic, mechanistic trajectory.

Choose - what a powerful and emancipating word. To choose is to authorize and set free. The Bible is a beautiful unfolding of God choosing in creation.

In the beginning, God chose to make a universe and a world and populate it with all sorts of wonderful things, from giraffes to hippopotamuses, to billy goats. In Genesis, we read of God's face hovering above the chaos, choosing to bring order and light, breathing into the world life. And out of the dirt, one can imagine God playing, yes playing and shaping a human being, and with this same holy breath, giving life. All of this because God chose to do so, and, so says God, it was good. It was very good.

Still God chooses.

- God chose Abraham and Sarah to be a light unto all people, that is all the world of who God is, and so, they left everything to chase God's choosing.
- God chose Moses to be the liberator, when Israel was enslaved.
- God chose Joshua, of whom we read about in today's text, to bring these same people into the promise land.
- God chose prophets to speak against the injustices and unrighteousness among God's children.
- God chose Jesus to set us all free.

Our text this morning is of Joshua, who is both celebrating the choosing of God and calling on the people to choose. Maybe, we should first understand what it is like to *not* be chosen.

Do you know what it is like to not be chosen? Were you ever the last one picked to play on a kickball or baseball team, and you were only chosen because there was no one left, and they had to let you play? Some of you remember what it was like to not be given the choice to sit in a movie theater on the main floor, because of

the color of your skin. Do you know what it is like to not be chosen, passed over for a job, no one asked you to the prom, ignored in the cafeteria or neglected by your spouse? To feel not chosen is to be rejected or negated.

The Romani gypsies have never been a chosen people. For a thousand years they have wandered from northern India throughout Europe. For nearly five centuries they were enslaved in parts of Europe, ending around the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Nazi Germany, the Roma gypsies were stripped of citizenship and sent to extermination camps, and this policy was extended to other countries such as Hungary. Some estimates are that as many as 1 million Roma gypsies died during the holocaust.

Can you imagine what it is like to be told by political powers and cultural conditions that you are not chosen?

On our first full day at the Gandhi School, this church paid for a pizza party for the students. We take such events for granted around here. In fact, most of us are rather sick of pizza. When you are not "chosen" in the larger culture, however, such acts of attention are special for these students. As they were lining up - crowding actually - ready for the doors to open, I roamed around smiling and saying hello, and mangling their native language with my feeble attempts at dialogue. These gypsy students responded in kind, glad to try out what English phrases they knew. I had my camera, and was snapping pictures along the way and I noticed that many of the girls would quietly turn around when I would take a picture. When I mentioned this to Clista, she said that the Roma gypsies have been told all of their lives how ugly their dark skin and hair was, and in spite of how confident they seem, they are ashamed for strangers to take pictures. Happily, after a day or so, they were glad to have their picture taken by us, but, on our first evening, many just turned their backs out of shame.

Do you ever feel like turning your back because you just do not feel like you are not worthy, not chosen?

If the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ is nothing else, it is this: God chooses you because you are created, filled with Holy breath, good and beautiful. In a world of negation, rejection, and oppression, God so chooses to accept us.

There are some choices we cannot make. You cannot choose, for example, where you are born. I was born in Eatonton, Georgia, and was raised by a loving family who provided for me everything I needed to grow and make my own choices. I did not choose my gender, genetics, my culture, or my country. I had, of course, nothing to do with my birth. Neither did you.

I was born in Eatonton, Georgia. Many of you were born here in Augusta. There are some who are born as gypsies. In Hungary today, in a recent poll, the majority of Hungarians did not consider Roma gypsies to be fully human. No child chooses to be a gypsy, a Roma. These are the people we were sent by this church, to offer a message, that they are chosen, and we have chosen to be with you.

One of the gypsy hymns Glen will sing when they come here in late June, is a mournful ballad that speaks of their rejection. Here are the words: *Green are the woods and green are the mountains/ Our luck just comes and goes/ Trouble cuts into our flesh with sharp knives/ the world has become a land of hypocrites/ The whole world is our enemy, we live like chased thieves/ We have not stolen but a nail from Jesus' bleeding palm/ God have mercy on us/ Don't let our people suffer any longer/ You have damned us/ You have beaten us/ You have made us eternal vagabonds.*

On the third day of our mission trip, Glen and Clista took us travelling through some of the Roma villages. Glen said, that unless we see students from the school we would not stop, because we would be viewed

with great suspicion by the villagers. The houses ranged from small shanties on the verge of collapse, to neat block houses. As our vans crawled by, locals would look intently at us with understandable curiosity.

In one village, I noticed a house with baskets placed alongside the fence. I asked Glen if they were for sale and he said he had no idea. He stopped the van, and we debated on the side of the road whether or not to get out and ask. A few of us decided to walk to the house - a rather simple block house on packed dirt - and ask the man who quickly approached us. He was flanked by a few other adults and many children - none of whom could speak any English. The baskets were for sale and we bought what he had, which was not enough for all of us. He was so pleased, that he invited Glen and me to come with him behind his house and showed us how he made them. It was quite an honor for us to be allowed onto their place, and we all agreed that this was a wonderful and positive interaction.

No one chooses to be a gypsy, just like we do not choose our own heritage or birthright. But we do have a message to share of God's choosing. Who will tell them of God's choosing, and now our choosing if someone does not go, buy baskets, and be invited into their trust?

We can choose also to reject or neglect this Gospel of Jesus. We can call people profane and have nothing more to say or do, as if we had something to do with our own "choseness." This is what Joshua was saying to the Israelites. "Choose your gods...decide where you stand...you are about to enter the promise of God." And some make a choice in this world to neglect this choice.

Clista gave a devotion on our second night, and so we huddled together in the modest breakfast room of our hotel in Pecs. She told about the hospitality of Hungarians and Roma and that if they wanted to extend to you their friendship they could very well offer you a glass - a shot really - of palinka. Palinka, according to Clista, is a homemade brew of various fruits and grain alcohol and she said, in her Louisiana brogue, "It would scald the hair off of a dog." After their first week or so on the mission field, they were offered a glass and not wishing to show ingratitude, choked down a shot. Later, she found a set of palinka glasses and so wishing to have a part of the Hungarian culture she bought them. The woman who sold them to her told Clista in broken English that the glasses were profane, that is, not for holy use.

Clista then made the brilliant connection that the Gypsies are like that palinka glass, considered profane and unholy. Yet, it is not the glass that is profane, rather, how we treat or use it. We choose everyday whether or not to believe in the profane, the unholy, the unloved.

Joshua in the Old Testament, has taken up where Moses left off, and now the people of God are in the land promised to them, surrounded by the profane Canaanites. Joshua asks of Israel, what will you choose? God? And by choosing God, you are also choosing to live as God lived on this earth - completely giving yourself away for others. "*Choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*"

Every day and every moment, we are presented with choices between what is profane and what is of God. That is, we choose to believe in the world's profanity or God's holiness. At the end of our time working at the Gandhi School, the director or principal of the school, Erika, informed Glen that the students had a presentation for us. Glen said he was shocked, because out of all the mission teams that have come and gone in the two years they have served the school, this was a first. We were tired and ready to go to the hotel and rest for a bit, but looked forward to whatever it was the Gandhi students had for us. First, two boys played their guitars, while two girls sang several gypsy songs - fast tempo and enthusiastic. One started dancing and grabbed Glen to join her. Next, one of the students, Timi, who spoke the best English among them, shared with us that they had made for us bracelets of friendship and baked for us a large loaf of gypsy bread - it must have weighed five pounds. We were dumbstruck and moved beyond words.

Just consider, that earlier that week, Clista held up a palinka glass and said that gypsies are seen like that glass – profane and unholy, not even human. Earlier that week, I was taking pictures where girls would turn their backs, ashamed. But that evening, they were giving us bread and bracelets they made with their own hands. When you choose to love, there will be some - maybe not all - but some, that make loving choices in return.

No, we did not change Hungary or the plight of the Roma gypsies living in their borders, but as a church, I share with you, there were some choices made, that made God-sized differences. One of the girls in my class was teaching a new student earlier this year. When she first arrived she did not even have underwear. About 70% of the students, when they first arrive at the Gandhi School, are in a similar plight. She had never owned a new pair of clothes. When Clista and the social worker took her to shop for school clothes with money donated from churches, she did not even know how to act. Clista had to explain what you do in a dressing room. By the time we saw her, months later, she was a giggling happy school girl, because believers have made choices to love with abandon.

This I believe - when we choose God in our life, the profane is redeemed into holiness, and when we love as God loves, redemption does happen. Change happens in us; change happens with our church and one person at a time, change happens with our world.