

Choosing Allegiances – Matthew 4:12-23

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Unfortunately, we all have to be reminded that there is still a war going on in Ukraine. Oh, we hear about it once in a while in the news, but here in the U.S. it has mostly taken a back seat to domestic politics and local matters surrounding issues like crime, education, and...the weather.

We have a tendency to dismiss events that happen so far away. We forget that there are still many dying and suffering as a result of the Russian land grab that is playing itself out in Eastern Europe.

And because of this tendency to tune out the war, we miss stories like this: *Last July 27, as the Soviet-era melody of the Russian national anthem filled the room, a small group of Ukrainians in this city [Kherson] seized by Russian troops nearly five months earlier swore allegiance to Moscow before being handed freshly minted Russian passports.*

"I love Russia. Glory to Russia!" said Igor Chaika, 58, one of the three, after pledging to defend the Russian Federation. Another, Alexandra Safronova, 92, wiped tears from her eyes. "I am happy. Thank you," she said after being handed a Russian passport by an armed man wearing a medical mask.

The week's ceremony in the city of Kherson, which took place beneath a portrait of President Vladimir Putin and Russia's coat of arms, a golden double-headed eagle, - was one of many that have taken place in Ukraine's southern Kherson region in recent months.

Russian-installed officials say more than 2,300 Russian passports had been handed out and more than 11,000 applications lodged in what Ukraine and the White House said was an illegal effort by Moscow to annex territory it has occupied as part of what they regard as an imperialist Russian land grab.

(Reuters, July 27, 2022)

So many Ukrainian citizens are facing this dilemma: choosing their allegiance between Ukraine and Russia. For some it's easy, but for others it's an agonizing decision forged by complicating factors related to ethnicity, nationality, and even family history.

Sometimes, we can have dual allegiances, allegiances we choose with far less important ramifications. For example, I can have dual allegiances to the schools I root for. I can root for my home-state Iowa State Cyclones, but also the Tennessee Volunteers. I can also root for Tennessee and the University of Alabama because I have a kid that goes to school there. (Can I really do that?)

I can say my allegiance is to the Midwest, where I spent most of my life. And yet, I love East Tennessee, too, and can see myself spending the rest of my life here.

Religiously, my allegiance lies with the Presbyterian Church USA, the denomination I am ordained in and in which I have found my life's work. Yet, I was raised in the Reformed Church of America, the denomination of my childhood church that helped form the foundation of my faith. I hold a certain allegiance to that brand of Christianity.

Our Gospel reading today is also a story that teases out where our allegiances lie. And to understand how this is so, consider the geographical context of where this story was being played out.

Matthew 4:12-13 reports that "Jesus heard that John [the Baptist] had been arrested." John's arrest, seemingly the catalyst for Jesus' ministry, spurs Jesus to move from Nazareth to "Capernaum, by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali."

Zebulun and Naphtali, of course, were two of the sons of Jacob and therefore tribes of Israel. Zebulun was the youngest son of Leah while Naphtali was the younger son of Bilhah, the woman enslaved to Rachel. Their tribal territorial allotments in the Promised Land, outlined in Joshua 19:10-16 and 32-39, were to the west of the Sea of Galilee and, by Jesus' time, included the region of Galilee. Thus, Jesus is "God with us" (1:23) in the Promised Land; and yet, that land is currently under Roman (in other words, Gentile) occupation.

Matthew underscores the occupation of the land by Gentiles by quoting Isaiah 9:1-2: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by these, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people who have sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for this who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

After Jesus moves to Capernaum in “Galilee of the Gentiles,” he begins preaching repentance because the “kingdom of heaven has come near,” a theme fleshed out (quite literally in the person of Jesus) in the rest of the Gospel.

The language of “kingdom” sets up God’s rule in direct opposition to Rome’s rule, thus repentance could also be understood as a choosing of allegiances. The very thing that the two sets of brothers are asked to do when Jesus calls them in 4:18-22.

When Jesus first sees the brothers Andrew and Simon Peter, they are fishing on the sea of Galilee. He says to them “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (4:19). He then sees two more brothers, James and John, in their boat with Zebedee, their father. They are mending their nets. Matthew 4:21 simply says “and he called them.” These brothers also immediately follow Jesus.

Some have wondered why Simon Peter and Andrew would walk away so quickly. Did they know Jesus beforehand? Were the sons of Zebedee more likely to follow Jesus because they saw the encounter with Simon Peter and Andrew? Were the men somehow disgruntled in their work? Were the sons of Zebedee disgruntled with their father?

While these are interesting questions, they cannot be answered by the text as we have it. Instead, by thinking about the call to repentance immediately preceding, the story indicates that the brothers chose their allegiance, even if we do not know why they did it so quickly.

How is this choosing an allegiance, you ask? As fishermen, scholar Warren Carter notes that these sets of brothers were likely under contract with the Roman Empire. “As brothers, and possibly members of a cooperative with James and John (4:21), they have purchased a lease or contract with Rome’s agents that allows them to fish and obligates them to supply a certain quality of fish.”² Their actions in following Jesus were a disruption, even if small, to Rome’s economic interests.

As professor Jillian Englehardt writes, By choosing Jesus, the brothers choose God’s rule over Rome. They choose to “fish” their land and the people in it for God’s purposes rather than exploiting it for Rome’s gain. They choose to join Jesus’ ministry in the Promised Land rather than to align themselves with the interests of the occupiers. Rome wanted the men to catch fish to advance their imperialist expansion. Jesus wants them to catch people for God’s rule, which as

Jesus will demonstrate throughout the rest of the Gospel, is a rule of mercy and justice and plenty. (Jillian Englehardt, Working Preacher for January 22, 2023)

I marvel at Jesus' courage here. He's moved to Galilee, Roman occupied territory. He's among Gentiles, and he has the courage to call these fishermen to leave their livelihoods—their allegiance to Rome—and show their allegiance to him. And by doing so, he would show his allegiance to them.

And frankly, I marvel at these disciples' courage just as much. The pressure they were under to feed their families and to maintain their obligations to the Roman government was high. And yet, they had the guts to walk away in allegiance to Christ.

We can't read this text and take it seriously without doing some deep reflection as to where our allegiances lie. More than just the teams we root for, or brand of soap we prefer, or the brand of tortilla chips we buy, our allegiances reflect our priorities and where our deeply held values lie.

So now's a good time to think about what people we deeply align ourselves with, or the philosophies we deeply adhere to, or the entities we worship. Is there truly someone or something that would cause us to leave everything else behind and follow?

Jesus invites our allegiance. As he invited those fishermen to leave everything and follow, so does he invite us to give our best to him. And that means a whole host of things, of course. It means trusting him to guide us and always having our backs. It means having this sense of belief that he forgives the ugly things we do and gives us another chance to be faithful. It means that, ultimately, we're not lost but are saved forever. And it means working toward the ideals he stands for: compassion, justice, and peace.

And theoretically, this means putting him and his ideals above all those other powers that would otherwise command our allegiance—selfishness, greed, worldly things, and the powers in the world that would tempt us.

There's a constant battle going on for our allegiance. Jesus challenges us with his invitation, and the disciples demonstrate just how much leaving everything behind for him is worth. Amen.