

Intro to Ethics started last week, and I did what I always do to enliven the first day of class: I presented them with the classic trolley problem. (Explain) It's a forced-choice, no-win situation, and nobody likes it. Some enterprising student always tries to figure out a third option, like derailing the trolley or hurling a flamethrower ahead so the people on the track will be startled and get off. More commonly, students try to figure out how they can avoid making a choice at all. They worry about "playing God," or which option will make them more culpable for the deaths. I tell them that not to decide is still a decision, and they accept that, but they keep trying not to decide.

Not to decide *is* to decide, though, and it's important to realize when a decision is called for, and to step up and make that decision and take responsibility. That's the situation in today's reading from Joshua. In many ways, he and the Israelite community have come to a crossroads. He is nearing death, and they will have to find another leader after Joshua. Moreover, their way of life is about to change. While Moses had led them through the wilderness, Joshua led them across the Jordan and into the Promised Land, and now they are going to live a settled life, with neighbors who are Canaanites. They won't worry about wild animals, but they will worry about hostile people. They won't worry about finding their daily manna, but they must now raise crops and build barns. They won't be tempted to reject God because life is so dangerous and uncertain, but because there are other people's gods around too, who look enticing and powerful and maybe more favorable. So Joshua tells them now is the time either to renew the covenant with God, or to cut loose and go find another god. He reminds them of all the ways God has guided and

protected them since the days of Abraham, and says, “Now, if you are unwilling to serve YHWH, 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 YHWH.”

The people assert that they choose YHWH. Joshua pushes them, reminding them that God demands a lot, but they insist, and together they renew the covenant there at Shechem. I thought about why it might be that at this crossroads (as it were) Joshua thought it was so important to invite reconsideration of their covenant with God, and I think it’s because when circumstances change, our ways of serving God may also need to change. Otherwise, not to decide may mean deciding not to serve. Think, for instance, about what nuns wear. The original purpose of their clothing was to make them unobtrusive. They would dress like other women of their time, but modestly and without ornament. By the 1960s, nuns in full habit were no longer unobtrusive. They were, in fact, exotic; and a nun’s habit actually became a Halloween costume. So many nuns decided to change what they wore in order to be faithful to the early intention of being unobtrusive. They put on modest street clothing and once again presented themselves as ordinary women.

Serving God while in the wilderness had been a matter of keeping the Ark safe so they could worship and treating community members with the respect and care demanded by the Law. Once settled in Canaan, serving God could be more complicated. The prevailing understanding for quite a while was that to serve God was to eradicate or enslave all non-Israelites, which had not been such an issue while they were alone. Over time, that consensus was challenged in favor of

compassion or even inclusion of non-Israelites (Ruth, Jonah), but we see both understandings in our texts because it was not clear to everyone all the time what it actually meant, on the ground, to serve God here and now. The decision to serve this God, our God, has to be made over and over again, with a discernment about what it means *now*, or how it might be different from what it meant or we thought it meant *then*.

The journalist Anand Giridharadas recently came out with a book called *Winners Take All*, asserting that philanthropy is bad for democracy. It strikes me as a helpful tool for re-thinking what serving God looks like here and now. What he says, as I understand it from reading reviews, is that in our context of vast income inequality, for the rich to endow charities serves more to justify their right to be rich than it does to rectify injustices. For instance, he points out that the Sackler family donates millions of dollars to universities and art museums, but they were deeply culpable in lying about the opioid crisis, denying that Oxycontin was addictive. Over 200,000 people have died in the opioid epidemic, but when you think of the Sacklers, you think of philanthropy.

Essentially, Giridharadas' charge is that business elites will give generously to charity in order to avoid changing the rules that keep the powerless out of power.

As *New York* magazine put it,

Like the dieter who would rather do anything to lose weight than actually eat less, this business elite would save the world through social impact investing, entrepreneurship, sustainable capitalism, philanthro-capitalism, artificial intelligence, market-driven solutions. They would fund a million of these buzzwordy programs rather than fundamentally question the rules of the game — or even alter their own behavior to reduce the harm of the existing distorted, inefficient and unfair rules. Doing the right thing — and moving away from their win-win mentality — would involve real sacrifice; instead, it's easier to focus on their pet projects and

initiatives. As Giridharadas puts it, people wanted to do “virtuous side projects instead of doing their day jobs more honorably.”

Ultimately, Giridharadas believes, this kind of pseudo-change staved off actual reform, and thus paved the way for Donald Trump, who recognized Americans’ real grievances. If our democracy had been functioning, instead of ceding power to private business, it would have addressed trade and the opioid crisis and education and immigration. Tending to the public welfare is complicated and inherently inefficient, not something to which markets are suited. In the absence of meaningful government action, charity has created the Potemkin village that perpetuated the illusion that things would change meaningfully.

<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/08/anand-giridharadas-on-winners-take-all.html>

I do not want churches to serve God by being political actors. We all know how theocracies work. But I think Christians—and other people of faith—should re-evaluate their support of charity and their reliance on charity as a change agent, and consider more assertive citizenship instead. The infrastructure of our democracy has not been tended to for a generation or more, and institutions are sadly hollowed out. In *this* place, at *this* time, we need to ask ourselves what it looks like to serve God, and renew our commitment to the God who chose a small and powerless people to be a light to the world.

God of deliverance, you saved the people of Israel and chose Joshua to lead your people to the Promised Land. Choose us, and equip us to live with faith and peace. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.