

5.12.2024 Sermon

Identity & Choices | Hebrews 11:27

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SPEAKERS

Rev. Dr. Tracy L. Saletta

So, we are in Hebrews 11:27. You know, it's interesting because everybody that comes up here, I don't know if you've noticed, if you've been here for longer than one sermon, every preacher that comes up here kind of complains about the verses that they're getting. I'm the one that assigns the verses. And as I was preparing my own verse, I found myself complaining about myself and what I had assigned. I'm like, "Who does this? Who's assigning these? Oh, wait, it's me. I'm assigning." So, here we go. It's a really long one. So, everybody get ready. Hebrews 11:27: "By faith, he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He persevered because he saw him who was invisible."

Thank you, fellow preacher. Exactly. I'm like, "Why did I break it up like this?" But I did. So, let me just recap the story of who he is. He is Moses. Let me just go back. The story is taken from Exodus 2:11-15. So, let me just start here. The Pharaoh at this time began to see that the Israelite community was increasing exponentially. His idea and his fear were that they were going to rebel and take over because their number was surpassing the number of the Egyptian community. His fear was that they were going to rebel and take over. So, he put out an edict to kill all the firstborn male babies of the Israelites. And so, into this edict, Moses was born.

When Moses was born, his parents saw that there was something very special about him. So, they kept him hidden for three months, which to me is miraculous. The first three months, especially of a newborn baby, I don't know about you, but mine cried. So, that's kind of amazing. They kept him hidden until they couldn't hide him anymore. His mom built a little reed basket. We learned from Sophia last week that the reed basket was a type of Ark, which I love because the image of an ark is a place of safety and preservation. She put him among the reeds. Usually, I've read this story, and I thought she set him in the Nile and he just went down

the river, but that's not what happened. When you go back and read the story, she put him in the reeds on purpose, which means Mama was a smart cookie. We'll get to that in a little bit.

Another player here is Miriam, his sister. Miriam stood with the basket to see what was going to happen. We'll talk about that more in a minute, too. Pharaoh's daughter comes out to bathe. She's watching the basket. Pharaoh's daughter sees the basket and tells her servant to go grab it. She opens it, the baby is crying, and she wants to keep the baby. So, out steps Miriam, his sister, and she goes, "Hey, I know somebody who can take care of the baby and nurse the baby. Do you want me to go get her?" She says yes. So, she ends up paying Moses' own mother to raise her own son until he stops nursing.

When the time came for Moses to be weaned, Moses' mother brings him to Pharaoh's house, and he becomes known as Pharaoh's son. We learned from Sondra last week, and I'm going to bounce off of Sondra's sermon a little bit here, that Moses chose to identify as a Hebrew rather than to be part of Pharaoh's household. This is huge. This is... I can't go past this quickly. Verse 26 says this: "He regarded disgrace for the sake of the anointed as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt. He persevered because he saw him who was invisible." And they say that twice.

I want to paint the picture here. Moses lives in opulence. He lives having every single need met. He lives having every privilege at his fingertips. He lives having everything he could ever want. By the way, he lived this way until he was 40. So, it wasn't like he was a young man. He lived into middle age and 40 at this time was old. It's a very long time. With all of that, and all of that living, he refuses to be known as Pharaoh's daughter's son. And I also want to say this, and this is an important part. It took him till 40. I think sometimes it takes a bit of growing up and some time for us to recognize things.

I think so often we jump ahead. Especially in today's age, with so much knowledge at our fingertips, we want to jump ahead quicker than what we're ready for. It took him 40 years to do this. It took him 40 years to go, "Wait a minute. This isn't where I belong. My identity is not as Pharaoh's son; my identity is actually as a Hebrew." Something happened to him that changed him. We don't know why. We don't know the backstory here. We don't know what changed Moses in this moment. But something went on within him, that though he was brought up in this system of privilege, he did not forget his heritage. Or maybe he forgot it for a time and then he remembered. We don't know. We don't know what it is that brought him to the point where he said, "I don't want to identify as being the son of Pharaoh's daughter."

So, he didn't forego his identity. He didn't let go of his origin. He saw the one who was invisible. We don't even know how Moses connected with God. We don't even know how Moses connected to his Hebrew faith. There's so much to this story that we don't have

information about. We just have little glimpses and gleams of it, but we don't have the full story. When I'm looking at this story of Moses, I see two things: identity and choice. So, keep those in your mind. Moses, in this moment, had the opportunity of choice. He had the opportunity to live in comfort or the choice to follow his call and his conviction. He had the choice to identify with one thing or the choice to identify with something else.

How we identify ourselves is so important because how we identify ourselves is how we live our lives. If I identify as a victim, I will live my life as a victim. If I identify as somebody with strength, I will live my life as a person with strength. How we identify ourselves is how we live out our lives. This is the story of all of our lives, of how we internally identify ourselves. When I'm looking at this story, my brain goes to what is it in a person that gives themselves the ability to step out of a compelling identity or an identity that they're entrenched in from family systems, that they choose to identify with something else.

If it's a compelling identity, to choose to identify with the marginalized, or the disenfranchised, or if it's an identity of victimization, or of abuse, or of pain, or of dysfunction, and to step into something of empowerment, and living in a different way, what causes a person to do that? I started to think of people who stepped out of compelling identities to identify with the marginalized. I thought of Gandhi. He started out as an attorney and gave that up to non-violently protest British rule over India. I thought of Dorothy Day, who started out as a journalist, became a Catholic radical, and led the movement in supporting peace, civil rights, worker rights, and women's rights through her prayer, publications, organizing, demonstrating, and education.

I thought of Martin Luther King. After he finished his doctorate, he went into Alabama and was very comfortable as a pastor. He was living a very quiet, happy life until he began to work in civil rights. I think of St. Francis of Assisi. He was the child of a wealthy cloth merchant. He wanted for nothing, and he renounced all of that to go live in a forest and become a monk, live among animals, and embrace a life of poverty. I think of Mandela. He was an attorney, and he lived within the system of apartheid and was making it work for himself. He chose not to identify with that and instead spent a lifetime fighting against apartheid.

All of these people, like Moses, did not identify with their wealth, comfort, or privilege. Instead, they chose something else for their lives for the sake of something bigger than themselves. These are the people that we know of. There are hundreds and thousands of people that we don't know of. Here's the truth: most of us are not Mandela. Most of us are not Martin Luther King. Most of us are not Mother Teresa. Most of us are just regular Joes or Betties. We're just regular people, living our lives. But the truth is, how we live our lives matters. The choices that we make, each one of us in this room, matter. How I live from my identity matters.

Most of us are simply going to be kinda average. We're just going to be normal people, living our lives. But as I was preparing, I thought of that story we all know. Of the person walking down the beach, finding starfish, picking up one and throwing it into the ocean. Another person was watching this person picking up starfish after starfish and throwing them into the ocean. They said, "What are you doing? Look at the number of starfish on the beach. You're just picking up one starfish at a time and throwing it in. You're never going to be able to throw all these starfish in." And he goes, "You know what? You're right." He goes back to this starfish and says, "It matters what I'm doing."

So, to the one person that we might touch in our life, it matters how we live our life. To the one person that we might have a conversation with, or make a choice to live differently, it matters to them. We do not live in a vacuum. We think we live in a vacuum. All you have to do is look at the vitriol on social media. People think when they're typing horrendous things into social media, I don't know where they think it's going, but on the other side of that is a human being. But they don't see that, they don't look at that. They just type away because I think personally in their brain, there's a non-person on the other side.

How do we so easily give the car next to us the finger? Because it's not a person in that car, it's an object. But it's a person in that car. So, we dehumanize the other person. As long as we're dehumanizing the other person, it doesn't matter what we do to them. But it does. It does matter what we do. So, what difference does what we're doing make? It makes a huge difference to the one who's on the receiving end of what we're doing.

When I'm looking at this story, I'm looking at the whole framework of choices. I can't help but think about the framework of choices and what our choices mean for other people. Keep identity in here because I haven't left that. In the words of Kevin, put a pin in my conversation about identity and even what our choices mean for God and how God interacts with our choices. I think sometimes we minimize the importance of our choices on others. I think we make choices and think, "Well, it's not hurting anybody." We don't know. I think the butterfly effect—we don't know what one choice that we make and how it's affecting others. Because honestly, in this day and age, we think we live in a vacuum, but we really don't.

We don't. My choice to do something affects people that I may never know or never meet, but it does affect other people. We're so used to being myopic in our own little worlds, that we don't understand that what I do has an effect. Oh, that we would understand that we do not live in a vacuum. I think about the importance of the words that we say. I think about the importance of the way that we think. I think of the importance of the way that we live. I think of the importance of the choices that we make.

So, let's pause there for a minute. Put another pin in there. I never used that. Kevin, where are you? Are you here? There you are. Right. I never used that until Kevin came along and said it in his sermons, and I've stolen it. So, Moses choosing not to identify with Pharaoh's household had huge repercussions. One choice the man makes has huge repercussions. It changed the nation. It changed the nation. So, Moses identifies with his own people and his own call. He felt his call. He knew that God was calling him to something, that he was called to be their leader. He was trained for it. God used the knowledge that he learned from Pharaoh's household. He learned how to be a leader in Pharaoh's household. But he was not ready.

He stepped out beyond his wisdom. He stepped out beyond his own power and God's timing. He stepped out a little too early. We are told in Acts 7 that Moses was called to be a ruler and a deliverer. But what happened with Moses is that he stepped out as ruler and judge, as what Acts tells us. Sometimes our wisdom is lagging behind God's timing. I have to say this: judgment never works. It never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever works. The only one whoever has the right to judge is God. And here's the thing about God's judgment: God's judgment died for us. God's judgment is seen by the love of the cross.

God's judgment loves the world so much, that God sent God's only son to this earth to die. You want to see judgment? Judgment is about self-sacrifice. Judgment is about coming and dying and doing it for us. That's judgment. So, if you want to judge, do that. But judgment never works. By the way, what was Moses going to do? Kill every Egyptian? Really? What was he going to do? Love—I'm sorry, judgment is about love and sacrifice. The truth is, we will never have the full picture to judge. Never. We never have the full picture of anybody's heart. You know, I was talking with somebody this week, and we were talking about Jesus's image on the cross of what he's saying, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

For me, that is the epitome of God's judgment. It is Jesus on that cross being crucified by people who thought they knew what they were doing. They had no idea. They did not understand the full picture. I have a personal bias that even the most heinous of things that happen, if there was a true deep revelation of the depravity or the pain that that person was causing, they would not be doing what they were doing. When Jesus is saying, "Forgive them, they know not what they do," even when we do something, we don't fully understand the repercussions of what we're doing. Even the most terrible and heinous of acts—do they really understand the fullness of what they're doing? That's the story I tell myself. That brings me to forgiveness, that they don't fully understand what they're doing. I hang on to those words of Jesus, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

That was an aside, by the way. So, Moses takes this judgment into his own hands. He ends up murdering a man. As a result, he runs. He runs into the desert, not knowing what he was doing next. I am going to read this quote because it's such a lovely quote. It's from William Barclay's

commentary, and I love this so much because so often we can feel that there is something that God is calling us to do. So often we can feel that there is something special, whatever it is, whatever it is that we feel like God might be calling us to do. Usually, when that happens, we think it's within 12 minutes that we're supposed to be doing it. Like we hear it, and then we're like, "I got to do it." Or we hear it and then we go, "Pastor Tracy's got to do it."

It happens more often than y'all would like to know. "Pastor Tracy, God told me this. So, how are you going to do it?" First, I'm not. Second, what are you going to do? "What do you mean I'm supposed to do it?" Yes, yes. That's just an aside too. Hold on, I lost my spot. Here it is. So, here's the quote: "The courage to abandon work on which one's heart is set, and accept the inaction cheerfully, as the will of God is of the rarest and highest kind, and can be creativeness sustained only by the clearest spiritual vision. When our fighting instincts say, 'Go on,' it takes a brave person to wait. It is human to fear to miss the chance. But it is great to wait for the time of God, even when it seems like throwing a chance away."

Such a powerful thing. To hear God whispering to do something. But to have the maturity to go, "But I will wait on the word of you saying, 'Go.'" It's the "go" that we get caught in because we hear it and get excited, which is lovely. Then we jump ahead. I think this is why my verse said it was by faith that Moses ran because he knew he was called to be a leader. But he was running from his call. I believe he felt he was running from his call at that time. That's my own belief that I have. I don't know that he had clear spiritual vision, but I do feel that he was running away from his call. So, there are times that we feel like we're in the belly of the whale, the desert, we're on hold. It's not where we thought we'd be. We're waiting beyond our own timeline. We can't see.

It's during these times that we focus on the one who is invisible. It is during these times that we trust in what we cannot see. We trust in the one that we cannot see. Moses had his own timeline, and it ended in murder. Sometimes when it's our own timeline, we can get in trouble. So, he runs and he spends 40 years in the desert. He gets refined in that desert. I love the image of the desert because oftentimes the image of the desert is the place in which God woos us. We fight against those places where we're called to wait. We fight against those places when we're in those spots where it feels like it's darkness. But the truth is, it's in those spots that God invites us to come into a deeper space with God.

If we could take these moments that are painful in our lives, and instead of battling God, which we so often do, and instead of asking the question that doesn't get us anywhere, by the way, of "Why?" And instead, we seek God and go, "God, how? Where? Show me," we get places a little deeper. I'm not saying that the circumstances change, but I am saying so often, we have an epiphany or a revelation, or a breath where we can keep going. So, he spends 40 years in

the desert, and God is wooing him there. God is molding him to be the leader and the deliverer that God originally was making him into.

So, let's go back to choices for a minute as I'm closing. I once heard Richard Rohr say, "How we do anything is how we do everything." This goes along with identity. I'm going to marry them together now. In a world that so often solely thinks of oneself and doesn't often take a lot of time thinking of repercussions of our decisions, when I look at this story of Moses, I see a series of decisions. So, let's go back for a minute. I think of Pharaoh making the choice to kill the babies, which was horrendous, it was genocide. At the same time, it sets all these other things into motion, and it sets the deliverance of the Israelites into motion 40 years later.

How does that work? I don't know. I think of the midwives who make the choice to lie when the Israelite women are giving birth to babies, and they say, "We can't get there in time. They give birth too fast." I think of Moses' mom and dad's choice to hide Moses. I think of Moses' mom placing him among the reeds. I think she was smart. I think she knew that Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe there. I don't think it was chance. I think they knew where she bathed. I think she went and brought that baby down there. Then there's the invisible woman, Miriam. I didn't even know that Miriam was the one who stood by Moses and went and brought him back until I saw Prince of Egypt, that cartoon.

I was like, "Who's that girl?" Then I'm like, "That's not in the Bible." Then I went and looked, and there it is in the Bible. Look at that. So, Miriam, you know, but nobody ever preaches about Miriam. How long was she standing there? Like, she just stood there and waited for the baby and then Pharaoh's daughter to look into the basket and Miriam again stepping forward to talk to Pharaoh's daughter. Moses' mom, once again, giving him up after he was weaned, giving up her son to Pharaoh's household. Again, Moses choosing to identify, and then him choosing to run into the desert. I'm not going to get into this, but him choosing to go to the well and help these women feed their goats and lambs, and he ends up marrying one of them.

Choices of who and what and how we're going to live, and choices of how we internally identify. There are things that we can't change about how we identify. But how we internally identify, we can change. I keep saying internally because this is where the rubber hits the road. In my coaching, I spend so much of my time talking to people about what are you thinking? What are you feeling? Because from what you're thinking and what you're feeling is what you're going to do. So much of coaching is helping people to break down their thinking and their feeling so that they have control over what they're doing. Because our internal always dictates our external.

When somebody says to me they did something, and they go, "But you know my heart," maybe I say it sometimes, maybe I think it most times. No, I know who you are because of

what you're doing. Because your actions are dictating your internal personhood. So, if you want to know who you are, watch what you do. Because that is who you are. No matter how much you tell yourself that story, what you're doing is an indicator of who you are. The beautiful thing is this: we can change. I can attest to that. Because where I started is not where I am now. Let me tell you something, it has taken a lot of work, a lot of work.

This is why I stand up here, week after week after week, saying, "We start from a place of belonging. We start from a place of being loved. We start from a place of being accepted. We start from a place of completeness." Because the place that I started from was of not belonging, of being second best, of being rejected. Once I found a wholeness in Christ, once I found that I didn't have to fight to belong, and I didn't have to fight to be complete, and I didn't have to fight for my place, once I discovered that I start from wholeness, and I live into that wholeness, it's a completely different place to live into.

This is why, because if we can grab a hold of our identities as being, we start from a place of winning. We start from a place where God speaks over every one of our lives when we are born. "You. Sure. You belong on this earth. You are loved completely and fully." When we start from that place and start to live into that, our identity is framed in a different way. Because so many of us start in different spaces of hardship, of hurt, of pain, of abuses. But when we start from a place where our identity is a solid space, of knowing that we belong and we are whole, we start from a place that we can live into that and be whole people.

So, our verse today says, "By faith, he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He persevered because he saw him who was invisible." That persevere—the Greek word there, it means to be persistent, to refuse to stop. So today, wherever you are, don't stop. Keep going. Keep your eyes on the one who is invisible. Trust that God has your back. Trust that you start from a place of belonging. Trust that you start from a place of being loved. Trust that God will get you where God needs you to be. Trust in the one who knows you more and better than anyone else on earth.

When I look at Moses, I wonder if he was in that desert for 40 years, and he thought that his call was over. I wonder if he just thought that it's done. We know that when God said it's time to go back to Egypt, that he was like, "No one's going to believe me. They're not going to trust me. Why are you sending me back?" So, we know he was filled with doubt and regret. Anybody ever been there? God is about redeeming everything. God is about restoring. God is about planting our true identity in us. God is about reminding us of our true identities. God is about loving us into the truth of who we are as humans.

If we could grab a hold of this, so this is what I want us to pause and do just for a few moments. If you have paper, take it out. If you don't, write it in your phone. Where are you in

your life right now? Just think about it for a minute. What kind of choices are you making in that space right now? What changes is God inviting you into? What, if anything, needs to shift? I'm going to have Dana put these questions out on our Facebook family page and also in our app. Is our app still working? On the newsletter. She's going to put it in the newsletter.

If you're in the desert today, can you hear God wooing you? Will you pause and allow God to woo you? What is God saying? What might God be inviting you to step away from in order to be someone's path to freedom? What is God's invitation to you in this moment? What is God whispering to you in this moment? Just grab a hold of that because I can preach up here all year. If we don't take something home with us... No matter. Just breathe it in.