

“Being Chosen”

John 15:9-17 – May 17, 2009

INTRO: Today’s reading is a continuation of last week’s story about the vine and the branches. The middle part of this chapter spells out more clearly what it means to bear fruit, to be of service and share our gifts. It may also tell us some surprising things about who the initiator is, in our relationship with God and with Jesus Christ.

Michael Ortiz, of Wauwatosha got in line at *The Price is Right* at 2:30am, so he could be on the show. Now, just sitting in the audience doesn’t mean he’s really on the show. Lots of smiling, waving, yelling people all hope they will have the chance to be a contestant and make bids on all sorts of items. And Michael was lucky to hear his name called along with the traditional “Come On Down.” He stood up, his arms wide, turning in circles and his hands punched the air as he headed to the stage. I was in hopes he wouldn’t hurt himself or embarrass all of Wauwatosha! But he was so elated to be chosen, that I think he just couldn’t contain himself.

Probably all of us know how good it feels: to be chosen for the job we hoped we’d get, to be accepted by the college we really want to attend, to be among the list of friends who are invited to a party, or to be chosen as someone’s dinner guest, or significant other, life partner, or spouse.

And I imagine there’s not one of us here today, who doesn’t know what it feels like to not be chosen—for whatever reason, to be passed by. We walk into a room of people for a benefit, and find that the table of seven to which we’re assigned, has 6 other people who are sitting with someone they know. But they are strangers to us. And to top it off, one of them wins the door prize of the table centerpiece.

We have experiences of not getting the job or the promotion, or not being chosen to lead the best project at the firm. These experiences can be just as devastating as being chosen is elating.

One of our retired United Methodist Bishops, Bishop L. Bevel Jones III, told of his boyhood memory of, “living near Grant Park in the heart of Atlanta. This was before the time of little league, but the kids would just gather at the ball field in the park and play whatever game was in season. Two of the bigger boys would always be captains and choose sides. Bishop Jones remembers that he was younger and smaller than most of them and would stand on the edge of the gang hoping to be selected. More than once, the captains would complete their choices, then look over at him—all forlorn and about to cry—and one of them would say, ‘You can have Jones.’” Imagine that—he was the one who was just given over to the other team—he wasn’t even chosen—here, just have him. Bishop Jones says “it didn’t do much to build his confidence, but at least he got in the game.”

(“Faith, Friendship, & Fruitfulness” 5/25/03)

I believe Jesus knew human nature well enough, to know how awful it is to not be chosen, and how awesome it is when we are. Consequently, when he was trying to make sense for his disciples, about how he loves them and how God loves them, he might as well have been talking to all of us who have stood at the sideline, waiting to be picked for the job, the baseball or soccer or kickball team, when he said: “You didn’t choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit.” (vs. 16)

Well, my goodness, he chose us—each one of us—he did the choosing, when all along we might have been under the impression that we made the first move toward him. The eight young people who are being confirmed today, may have thought their decision was all their own doing—maybe it was, or maybe they were influenced by family or friends, or just maybe, Christ or God made the first move.

Perhaps “we don’t pick Christ. He might have sought us out, recruited us as it were—not by coercion, nor by conscription, but out of loving care, out of belief in us, out of concern that we get to know him, enjoy fellowship together, and become all we are capable of being.” (Bishop L. Bevel Jones III)

As with those first disciples, Jesus takes the initiative. Christ may be able to see something in us, that we can’t see ourselves. He may come upon us and say, “Now there is one to whom my heart is drawn and out of whom I know that I can fashion something of worth and value.” (Arthur Gossip)

And he uses ordinary people for his work—a few who are ordained, who become pastors and priest, and a lot who are not. He uses people who may be gifted and not know it, and people who do the job well on some days, and mess up on others.

Think about who Jesus chose as his first disciples. “He chose fishermen—known to be crude and foul-mouthed, impatient and hot-headed. He chose a tax collector—known to be a swindler. He chose a zealot—a fanatical revolutionary. Jesus chooses us—known sinners, known to be somewhat less than perfect, known to have all kinds of problems in our lives. As someone once said, ‘God elects the rejects.’” (Brian Stoffregen)

Mary Ann Bird tells about her growing up years in a short story called “The Whisper Test.” It’s a true story. “Mary Ann grew up knowing she was different, and she hated it. She was born with a cleft palate, and when she started school, her classmates made it clear to her how she must look to others: a girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth and garbled speech. When schoolmates would ask ‘What happened to your lip?’ she would tell them she’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. She was convinced that no one outside her family could love her. There was, however, a teacher in the second grade that all the children adored—Mrs. Leonard. She was short, round, happy, a sparkling lady. Annually they would have a hearing test. Mary Ann was virtually deaf in one of her ears; but when she had taken the test in past years, she discovered that if she did not press her hand as tightly upon her ears as she was instructed to do, she could pass the test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was Mary Ann’s turn. She also knew that from past years, that as they stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something and they would have to repeat it back...things like, ‘The sky is blue.’ or ‘Do you have new shoes?’ Mary Ann waited there for those words which God must have put into her teacher’s mouth, those seven words which changed her life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, ‘I wish you were my little girl.’” (as told by Spencer Morgan Rice, “The Drama of God,” Trinity Church, Boston)

She was the one chosen by the teacher. Seven words that were some of the most powerful she had ever heard.

Philip Yancy in *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, says that “sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would our lives change if we truly believed the Bible’s astounding words about God’s love for us, if we looked in the mirror and saw what God sees? Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, ‘You must be very close to God.’ The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, ‘Yes, God’s very fond of me.’” (pp. 68-69)

I wonder who we might all become, if we began to become the person God already believes we are, or can be? I once was appointed to serve a church that was small and getting smaller. Shortly after I arrived, I heard stories from the people there, about how they didn’t have much to offer as a church, and didn’t know why anyone would want to join them. The previous pastor, even though he was full-time, was not in the church office very much and he felt like there was just not enough work there to keep him busy. One of the first things I did was to establish regular office hours, just like a church that might be twice their size. And I had some brainstorming sessions with the leaders of the church about their hopes and dreams. We gradually increased programming, and widening our ministries. Things began to turn around. I chose to treat them more like the church they could become. They just needed someone to hold a mirror up for them, so they could see the gifts they had to offer.

The looking-glass self given to us by God, needs to be always in front of us and always in our minds. Perhaps our regular mantra needs to be that God chooses us—and that God is very fond of us.

To be chosen, to be valued by someone else is one of the greatest experiences. But responsibilities go with it. Being chosen means being chosen for a purpose, recognizing that God or Christ may have a job for us. If we’re chosen for the team, we are responsible to come to practice and to give it our best. If we are chosen for a job, we have to be productive. If we are accepted for college, we soon learn we have to go to class and spend some hours studying. And if we’re chosen by someone to be their friend or life partner, we have to be loyal and faithful to that other person.

The responsibilities that come with being chosen by Jesus, are that we are to bear fruit in our lives—to be productive at loving others as we would love ourselves. It’s knowing that we are chosen yes, but it’s also being aware that a response is expected.

Fred Craddock tells the story of the family out for a drive on a Sunday afternoon. They are relaxed and having a good time, when suddenly the two children are yelling, "Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There's a kitten back there on the side of the road!" And of course the father gives all the reasons why they shouldn't go back: they don't have room for another animal, maybe it belongs to somebody else, etc. etc. But the children are persuasive and use the old "But it may be sick and it could die if we don't pick it up." AND, "We never thought our Daddy would be so mean and cruel as to let a kitten die." At the urging of his wife, the father turns around and goes back and pulls off to the side of the road. He goes out to pick up the kitten, who is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy, the kitten bristles, bares its teeth and claws and hisses at him. He picks up the kitten by the loose skin at the neck, and brings it back to the car, telling the children to not touch it, "because it's probably got leprosy." When they finally get home, the children give the kitten several baths, about a gallon of warm milk, and beg for the cat to stay in the house, "just for tonight." The father says, "Sure, take my bedroom; the whole house is already a zoo." They fix a comfortable bed for the kitten and several weeks pass. It's getting healthier, and more at home all the time. One day, the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down, and there is the cat. He reaches down toward it, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it doesn't bare its claws or teeth; instead it arches its back to receive a caress. This was the same cat his children had convinced him to pick up off the side of the road. It was the one they had cared for, and that had made all the difference. *(Craddock Stories)*

That cat knew it was chosen and loved, and its response was to love in return. We love, because God first loved us. Because God first loved us, God chooses us, calls us, cherishes us to become the people God believes we can be, as we find ways to serve and love the rest of God's people.

--Sue Burwell

