

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

[12] "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13] No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. [14] You are my friends if you do what I command you. [15] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

[16] You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

[17] I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

CHOSEN

When I was growing up we didn't have organized physical education in the elementary grades. We had recess. Recess meant that we went outside while the teachers watched us from a distance. And so it was up to us to create our physical education program which we readily did. Two of the more athletic boys would act as captains and each would take turns choosing the next best players to make up our basketball teams.

Now that was okay for those who were good enough to be chosen in the early rounds of this impromptu draft. But, those of us who were not so skillful at the sport of basketball were chosen last ... sometimes dead last.

And that didn't feel so good. It's funny how we hold on to those feelings of not being chosen. Fortunately we usually have other memories that are much more affirming.

When I graduated from high school I applied to college. I still remember when the letter came. They had chosen me! That was a wonderful feeling to be chosen. I remember when the call came from that first job interview. The job was mine. I would start next Monday. It was great that they had chosen me.

Not long after that I remember asking the girl that I loved to marry me. She said "yes." Again I had been chosen and I was really happy!

In fact, one way to define love is to say that we are chosen. Someone wants us. Someone cares for us. Someone believes in us.

And that's how the Bible often defines love as well. It's called the doctrine of election, and it simply means that God has chosen us.

In our lesson for today Jesus told his disciples, "I chose you." And Jesus tells us the same thing today. "I choose you. You are mine. You are on my team."

GOD CHOSE US

We might be chosen by a basketball team because we have ability. We might be chosen by a school because we have academic potential. We might be chosen by an employer because we have skills that are needed.

But, why does God choose us to be a part of his kingdom? Does he pick us because we are good boys and girls? Does he choose us because he sees that we have potential? Does God pick us because we wave our hands in the air and say "Pick me, pick me!"?

The answer is none of the above.

God doesn't reach out to us not because we deserve it. God doesn't pick us because we have great potential and deserve to be taken first in the all saints'

draft. God chooses us out of unconditional love. It is by grace, pure grace that God calls any of us. God through our election expresses the glory of his grace. It's not about our choice. It's about his.

Jesus told those first disciples, "You did not choose me. I chose you."

Do you think it was Matthew's idea to leave a lucrative job with the Roman IRS so that he might follow a poor itinerant preacher by the name of Jesus? I don't think so.

But, when Jesus called Matthew, he got up from the tax table and followed. He left the old life behind.

Do you think that Peter, James and John imagined that they would ever do anything but fish for fish? That was what their family had always done. But, when Jesus chose them, they dropped their fishing nets and followed Jesus to fish for men and women.

They did not choose Jesus. Jesus chose them. He chose them out of love, and their lives were never the same. I believe the process is the same even today.

Sometimes a young person will tell me almost defiantly, "I would *never* choose to be a minister" as if to say to me, "I think you made a bad choice". But, that particular encounter never bothers me. Instead I have to smile to myself as I think, "It wasn't my choice. Nor is it your choice. Your life and what you are called to do is God's choice."

Now that might seem terribly restrictive in a society that tells its children, "You can grow up to be whatever you want to be. All you have to do is work hard enough and the dream can be yours."

There is some truth to that statement. With hard work and dedication people can accomplish some amazing things. But, I do not believe life is all about us and what we want to do and be. It's not just about our dream. I think that there is more to our life than catching fish, making money or sinking one more free throw.

I think we have all been chosen for something much more meaningful than any of those things. It is a mission that comes not from us but from above. God in Christ comes to us and tells us, "You didn't choose me. I have chosen you."

If that's true, if God has chosen us, what does that choice mean? What are we chosen for? There are three things for which we are chosen.

OBJECTS OF MERCY

First we have been chosen as objects of God's mercy.

In Christ we have a portrait of the grace of God. Every week I remind us of this fact. I proclaim after the prayer of confession, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." We are not forgiven because we deserve it. We are not forgiven because we met God half way and then God helped us the rest of the way.

No, we are chosen for forgiveness out of pure grace. The old hymn puts it well. "Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe."

In our lesson for today Jesus told his disciples,
"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."
John 15:13 (NRSV)

And that's what Jesus did. He died for our sins on the cross of Calvary. Jesus paid the price. Our redemption is not cheap. It was purchased for us by the blood of God's own Son.

And so we are the objects of God's mercy. We are demonstrations of just how much God loves us. We are chosen by God for forgiveness.

FRIENDS

But there is more to salvation than just forgiveness. Jesus also chooses us to be his friends.

Jesus told his disciples that his sacrifice for them would be the sacrifice of friendship. He lays down his life for his friends.

This is a new teaching. The disciples of Jesus had been chosen to be his servants, to follow their master along wherever he went and do whatever he taught them to do.

But, now the relationship is changing. They would no longer be called servants. Now they would be his friends.

God in Christ called those first disciples to be his friends, and I believe that God in Christ calls us to be his friends as well. We are chosen by God for friendship. We are chosen by God to have a relationship with him.

Just as we are able to tell a good friend what is going on in our life, so we are able to tell our Lord what is on our mind. We share our life with him. And, believe it or not, God shares his life with us. God communicates with us.

That's what the gospel of John is all about. It's about the word made flesh, the restoration of sight to a man born blind, and the coming of the Spirit of truth who will "teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (John 14:26)

In other words, God does not leave us in the dark when it comes to the divine plan. We are his friends and as his friends we are privy to inside information.

Our eyes have been opened and we see the truth, the whole truth in the life of his Son, Jesus.

One commentator wrote,

"What makes people friends of Jesus is their being captured by the story, following the sometimes comforting, sometimes disturbing plot that leads to the cross and the empty tomb, and finding in it the light to guide their way in the world."

The story of Jesus guides us on our way. And as the story becomes a part of our life, it dawns on us. We are no longer servants, slaves to a life without meaning or purpose.

Jesus has chosen us to be his friends. In the Bible Jesus is given many titles ... Lord, King, Master, Teacher ... just to name a few. But, sometimes I

think the unassuming title of friend might just be the most significant of them all.

WHAT A FRIEND

Today we sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus ...” It’s no accident that this has been one of the most popular hymns of all time. It expresses one of our deepest desires. What people want most is a friend with whom they can share their deepest desires. Did you even notice that when a spouse wants to pay a compliment to her mate she will say something like, “and he’s also my best friend.”

Friendship is the ultimate expression of love. To be chosen as a friend by anyone is a high honor. To be chosen as a friend by Jesus is an even greater honor and joy. The Bible tells us that the King of kings, the Lord of lords and the ruler of the universe is also our friend.

William Barclay talks about a custom in the ancient world that sheds some light on what it means to be a friend of God. There was a very select group of men who were called friends of the king.

This elite group had access to the king at all times. They even had the right to come into his bedroom at the beginning of the day. The king talked to this select group even before he talked with his generals or his statesmen.

The friends of the king had the most intimate connection with this man of power. They had the right to see him at any time.

And when Jesus called his disciples friends, he gave them (and us, his latter day disciples) the same privilege. We have access to the king of creation. We have the right to come to him at any time.

That’s what we believe. We believe that Jesus has chosen us. Jesus is our friend. We can share our grief and burdens with him, and in the story of Jesus we receive the answer that we need to make sense of our life.

So, we now have two reasons that we are chosen by Jesus. First, we are chosen for forgiveness and salvation. Second, we are chosen to be his friends.

CHOSEN TO LOVE OTHERS

And since this is a sermon, there's a third reason why we are chosen. We are chosen to spread God's forgiveness and friendship to others. We are agents of God's gracious selection process.

Jesus told his disciples that they were to love one another. This was not an optional extra. It was a command.

We talked about this last week. Love as the Bible describes it is not a feeling. Love is an act of the will. Love is a decision based upon the fact that God in Christ has first loved us.

Jesus told his disciples in our lesson for today, "You are my friends if you do what I command ... if you love others as I have loved you." (See John 15:12, 17)

Now how can Jesus command us to love? He can command it because he first loved us. His forgiveness and friendship call forth the same kind of behavior from us.

Let's think of it this way. If a child is brought up in a home where love is expressed and valued, what kind of child will come from that home? Most likely the child will be a loving child. The actions of the parents command a response. The child learns about love by being loved by others.

THE PRIME DIRECTIVE

A rabbi and a soap maker went for a walk one day. The soap maker said to the rabbi, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery in the world. After thousands of years of teaching about love and peace, the world is worse today than ever before."

The rabbi said nothing at first as they continued their walk. Finally they came across a child playing in the gutter. The rabbi said, “Look at that child playing in the gutter. He is filthy. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, the child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is after all.”

The soap maker protested, “But, rabbi, soap can’t do any good unless it is used.”

“Exactly,” said the rabbi. “And so it is with religion. It can’t do any good unless it is applied.”

Everyone wants to talk about love, but it is those who apply it that make a difference in the world.

Are any of you Star Trek fans? Those of you who know that the explorers of the starship Enterprise were given a prime directive, a number one rule that they were to follow at all times. What was the prime directive? Don’t get involved.

The prime directive in Star Trek was not to become involved with or interfere in the lives of the alien worlds that they encountered. They were only explorers who were to observe from afar and let nature take its course.

We who voyage with Jesus also have a prime directive, but it is somewhat different from the Star Trek model. Our prime directive is to get involved. Our prime directive is to love others as he has first loved us, that is, we are called to love others unconditionally.

That’s what made the life and ministry of Jesus unique. He was always faithful to that prime directive. Even as he was killed by people he loved Jesus proclaimed a word of forgiveness and friendship.

That’s why we’re here today. The words of Jesus are eternal words, eternal words of hope and love and forgiveness. In a world filled with hatred, violence and war, there is a different message, a different truth that the world needs to hear in word and deed.

The truth is not *out there*. The truth is in here, in our hearts. The truth is in a people so overwhelmed by the love of God in Jesus Christ that they are

willing and able to do some amazing things. This is our compass needle. This is our prime directive. We are called to love others as he first loved us.

REVENGE NOT ALLOWED

The reporter was interviewing an old man, a grandfather, who was obviously still in intense grief over the shooting death of his teenaged grandson. The grandson had been shot by in a robbery of the family's little neighborhood grocery store.

“Do you want revenge on those who did this?” asked the reporter. “Would you like to shoot the person who shot your grandson?”

The old man looked astonished at the question. “No, that’s not possible,” said the grandfather.

“I guess you don’t even know for sure who did this,” said the reporter.

“No,” said the grandfather. “It’s not that. It’s that we are Christians. We are not permitted revenge.”

The grandfather knew the prime directive, and he was following it, even in the most difficult of situations. He was not permitted revenge. His heart and soul belonged to Jesus and that changed how he reacted to those who had hurt him.

UNPOPULAR LOVE

That kind of love does not fit in our world and that kind of love can even make us the objects of scorn. In the Scripture that immediately follows our lesson for today, Jesus warns his disciples that showing his kind of unconditional love can be dangerous. Jesus said that if the world hated him, the world would hate his disciples as well.

But, the disciples needed to remember that Jesus had “chosen” them to be different from the world. They were to follow the prime directive of loving others even when that meant being unpopular. (See John 15:20-25)

“Erich Honecker was deposed as East Germany’s chief of state while the country was undergoing tremendous change. The turmoil in East Germany received a great deal of attention, but an unpopular act of Christian reconciliation went mostly ignored.

Honecker was widely hated by others. After being ousted from his position, he was not allowed to live in his luxury villa.

A Lutheran pastor offered to let the homeless Honecker live in his guest room. The pastor even paid Honecker’s expenses. This was especially surprising since Honecker had once persecuted the church.

This move was widely resented. Many people threatened to quit the church (and some did). The pastor received vile phone calls. When asked why he did it, the pastor cited a passage of Scripture.”

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”
(2 Corinthians 5:18, 20).

(Arthur Paul Boers, Lord, Teach Us to Pray, Herald Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 1992)

The Lutheran pastor had it right. We are ambassadors of Christ. We are ambassadors of love and reconciliation. We have been chosen to proclaim a message of forgiveness and friendship in word and in deed to the whole.

It will not be easy. Sometimes it won’t be popular. But, this is the task for which we have been chosen. May God help us fulfill this sacred task.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN