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Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

May 9, 2021

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

I have been captivated by these verses this week. I couldn't quite get my head around the full impact of Jesus' words...*You did not choose me but I chose you*. It seems straight forward on the surface but when you start to realize the full story that's unfolding...what has happened right before our text for today and what will happen soon after, these words take on a much deeper and complex meaning.

Let me frame for you what's going on. In our Gospel, Jesus is talking to his disciples in what is known as the farewell discourse. He is teaching them his final lessons, saying goodbye and sending them forth to continue the mission Jesus himself had begun. And in verse 16, Jesus tells the disciples that he has chosen them specifically to do this work. However, just a few verses earlier he had told Peter that Peter will turn from him and deny him...not once but three times. And, he chooses Peter anyway. Jesus also chooses Judas...even though he knows that Judas will betray him that very evening. He chooses Judas anyway.

It makes me wonder how in the world could this be? How could Jesus choose the kind of people who would hurt him so deeply? How could he trust them with his mission? And yet, he chooses them just as they are. Not only does he choose them but he appoints them to go out and be the kind of followers of Christ that others will listen to and learn from.

To bring this a little closer to home...I want you to imagine your closest friend or your dearest family member turning their back on you the way Peter and Judas did. Imagine them lying about you, deceiving you. How would that feel? What would you do?

Well, Jesus responds by gathering up this group of messed up, misguided, at times outright cowardly folks and decides that those are the people who can carry on his ministry after he is gone. It's a leap of trust to be sure. But more importantly, it's an act of beautiful, faithful love. Love that knows no boundaries. Love that exceeds expectations. Love that is merciful and full of grace. And, I think what we learn is that it is the kind of love that is first and foremost a love rooted in forgiveness.

For me, it stands in sharp contrast to our current culture that all too quickly calls people out for their missteps. A culture that is quick to judge and even quicker to condemn. A world where accusations breed distrust and mistakes (no matter how big or how small) become the fuel to tear one another apart.

And, if you are the wrong side of such accusations and defamation, if you have been denied forgiveness and not given an opportunity to correct what was broken, you know how badly this kind of judgement cuts straight to your heart. Or on the flipside, if you have been the one closing doors on those whom you are in conflict, chances are you feel a pit in your stomach, a pit created from the hurtful feelings that have been weighing your heart down. Because both sides of that equation hold Peter and Judas moments. Moments of denial and betrayal. Moments that need forgiveness.

This is where our text has challenged me this week. It's those kinds of people, the ones who deny and betray that Jesus chooses. And we know that by choosing these broken people to be his disciples, he is also choosing us. Putting his trust in you and me to be his heart out in the world. Choosing us when our hearts have been darkened by conflict. Choosing us when we have turned away from forgiving one another. Choosing us when we become so self-righteous that we fail to see our own sin.

And here is the heart of the Gospel message...it is in choosing that we are finally able to forgive and to heal. It is in choosing that we begin to listen and learn from one another, where we put our anger and jealousy and contempt aside and start to trust that together we can do better. Jesus is choosing us to do better.

Theologian Gennifer Brooks puts the challenge of our chosenness this way:

"What does it take to set aside all that one believes about others, to set aside the prejudices that prevent or stifle friendship, in order to join others in being truly the Body of Christ?"

She states that this is the kind of loving action that Jesus is talking about when he says in verse 13 that there is no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends. It's a love based in forgiveness...that is boundless in acceptance and fully embracing in the midst of division. We lay down our lives for one another because we are willing to take the risk of choosing one another even when we desperately want to close the door and walk away. Jesus is teaching that he is going to be right there with us to help us reopen those doors so that we can finally and faithfully bear the fruit of reconciliation with one another.

One of my favorite verses comes after our reading in Acts. It's Acts 11:17 when Peter asks..."Who was I that I could hinder God?" The one who denied Christ reflects back in this verse and sees God's hand at work in his life...not alienating Peter for his faults but growing him forth into his calling as Jesus' own. No matter what Peter did, he couldn't keep God's love from him. God doesn't withhold love or purpose or guidance or forgiveness no matter the depth of Peter's denial. Instead, God uses those moments to build a life of dedication and deep faith.

This week I want you to reflect on what this might mean for your life. What would it mean to claim your chosenness? How would that reflect in your relationships? For some of us we are going to have to start with the basics of saying I'm sorry, of asking forgiveness, and of trusting

our hearts to the ones we have hurt. For others' we are going to have let go of our anger and hurt and self-righteousness and trust that our humility will be sufficient to begin rebuilding what was broken.

Pastor and writer Johnathan Richardson encourages us so beautifully in this regard. He reminds us that,

“The powerful proclamation of Christian peacemaking is that we do more than recognize our common brokenness. We expose brokenness as contrary to the condition of humanity, and we work to witness to the true condition.” He goes on to say that it is in the act of forgiveness that we invite our enemies into the work of peace as a friend. “Christians are able to love our enemy in this way because our enemy does not define us. We are both defined by God.”

That is the heart of being chosen. That is the power of love and trust and forgiveness at work in and through us. Just as Christ chose his disciples right in the midst of their own brokenness so we are chosen, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.