

Sixth Sunday of Easter B May 6, 2018 John 15:9-17

Jesus said:

"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (v. 16).

Jesus was talking to his disciples. They were ordinary men—about as ordinary as you could get—but Jesus chose them to be his disciples. Jesus invited them. He called out to them, saying, "Follow me!" That isn't how it was supposed to work. Rabbis didn't go around asking young men to study under them. No rabbi would do such a thing. A young man who wanted to be a rabbi would have to ask a rabbi if he could be his student. The greater the rabbi, the more young men would be seeking to study under him. Jesus had become famous because of his teachings and his miracles. Crowds came from everywhere to hear him—and to let their children see him. I'm sure that there were dozens of young men—probably hundreds—who would gladly have put aside whatever they were doing so that they might study with Jesus. Some of those young men would have been really bright—highly accomplished. They could have done great things—if Jesus had chosen them to be his disciples. But Jesus didn't do that. Jesus chose twelve rather ordinary men to be his disciples. The Gospels present them to us as slow—a bit thick-headed—weak of faith—sometimes denying—sometimes doubting. One even went so far as to betray Jesus to the men who wanted to kill him. But none of that seemed to bother Jesus.

He was perfectly satisfied with this little band of disciples.

He told them: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." We wonder what Jesus was thinking when he chose these very ordinary disciples. His choices seem so odd. And yet, the growth of the first-century church shows that Jesus chose well—or that he empowered well. These disciples would do great things, not because they were great, but because the one who empowered them was great. There's an important lesson here. God chooses whom God chooses. God empowers whom God empowers. A quick glance around the typical congregation will show that God has not chosen the brightest and the best. Most Godly work is done by ordinary people distinguished by only one thing—they have given God their heart. That should encourage us. It should also make us hesitant to judge any person's potential. The star athlete and the valedictorian might be too full of themselves to do God's work. The ordinary person is more likely to be the one that God chooses to transform the world. God chooses whom God chooses. I would like to let you in on a secret. The secret is this. Christ has chosen you. God has a plan for your life, and has chosen you to carry out that plan. God's plan for your life is important. His plan might not cause your name to go down in history. It might not make you rich. But God's plan for you is important. He has work for you to do that no one else can do. If you don't do it, it will languish undone. I can't tell you what God's plan for your life is—and it's quite possible that you don't have a clue. But the plan is there. God has put it there. Pray that God might reveal the plan to you—and that you might have the faith to pursue it.

Pray that, empowered by God, you might accomplish what he has created you to do. I am going to quote a few scripture verses. As I do so, listen to them as if God is speaking to you—speaking to you directly—speaking to you personally:

The first scripture is from the book of Deuteronomy. After he had come down from Mount Sinai, Moses spoke these words to the people of Israel. He said, "You are a holy people to... God: ...God has chosen you...for his own possession" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Now listen to that verse again as if God is speaking those words to you. **Say your name**, you are a holy person to God. God has chosen you for his own possession. That is true. Every person here today is a holy person to God.

You are a holy person to God. Let me say that one more time. Listen carefully. Here it is—YOU are a holy person to God. YOU! God has chosen YOU for his own possession. You might be sitting there, thinking, "That doesn't apply to me. I'm not a holy person. I am totally unworthy." If that's how you are feeling right now, listen carefully. You are a holy person to God—not because you are wonderful, but because God is wonderful. What does that mean? What does it mean that you are holy? In the Bible, to be holy means to be set aside for a Godly purpose. The Sabbath day was holy, because God set it aside as a day of rest and worship. The tabernacle and temple were holy, because God set them apart for worship. Priests and Levites were holy, because God designated them for his service. Now listen once again to those words from Deuteronomy—tailored to fit you. **NAMES** you are a holy person to God. God has chosen you for his own possession. God has chosen you to render a holy service. Pray about that.

Pray that God will help you to live up to the task for which he has created you. Just in case that scripture verse brought you to heights where you feel uncomfortable, I'm going to read another verse that will let you down a notch or two. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul was talking to the Christians in Corinth about their calling—what God had called them to be and do. He said, "Not many are wise.... Not many mighty, and not many noble" (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Does that bring you down a little? Does it make you feel more comfortable? Are you saying, "That's me! I'm not wise. I'm not mighty. I'm not noble. I'm just an ordinary person—really ordinary. Why would God call me to do anything important?" But listen carefully now, because Paul goes on to say:

**"But God chose the foolish things of the world
that he might put to shame those who are wise.
God chose the weak things of the world,
that he might put to shame the things that are strong;
and God chose the lowly things of the world,...
that he might bring to nothing the things that are:
that no flesh should boast before God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).**

So if you feel too ordinary to be important to God, think again! God specializes in getting his work done through ordinary people—unlikely people. If you don't believe that, read through the stories in the Bible and you will see it over and over again.

- God chose people like Jacob, who was a cheater.
- God chose Joseph, who was a really snotty kid.
- God chose Moses, who begged God to find someone else.
- God chose Peter, who denied Jesus three times.
- God chose Paul, who at that time was persecuting Christians.
- The list goes on and on.

So if you think you are an unlikely candidate for Godly work, think again. God has his eye on you. God has a purpose for your life—a Godly purpose. He has important work for you to do. Pray about it, and seek each day to walk in harmony with God's will. I'm going to quote one more verse. This time it's Jesus speaking. Jesus was talking to his disciples, but he is also talking to you. He says, "You didn't choose me, but I chose you, and appoint you, that you should go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). God appointed us to bear fruit—lasting fruit. What kind of fruit? Was Jesus talking about winning new converts? No! Was Jesus talking about building a new church building? No! Was Jesus talking about memorizing Bible verses? No! Jesus says, "I command these things to you, that you may LOVE one another" (John 15:17). The fruit that Jesus calls us to bear is love for one another. Can we do that? Can we love one another? The better you get acquainted with the people gathered here, you may find people you don't like very well. How can Jesus expect us to love people we don't like? Let me tell you how. The word that Jesus used for love is the Greek word *agape* (pronounced a-GAH-pay). *Agape* love has nothing to do with warm, fuzzy feelings.

Agape love is love in action.

Agape love is acting in kind and generous ways—whether we like the other person or not. We can do that. We can be kind and generous, regardless of how we feel about the other person. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God. But then he said that a second commandment is almost as important—and that commandment is that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). If we will do those two things—love God and neighbor—the rest will fall into place. I'm not suggesting that it will be easy. God rarely makes things easy. But if we love God and neighbor, God will bring Godly fruit from our lives. Loving one another is easy when things are going well--when people are doing what we want. But loving one another is hard when things are not going well--when people are doing things that hurt us--that make us miserable.

But when Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us, he is calling us to love one another through thick and thin--through good and bad. He is calling us to love the other person when that person has hurt us--has done us injury.

That's impossible. It's not possible to love people who have hurt us—who have caused us injury--except by the grace of God. NATURE calls us to hurt those who hurt us--to injure those who have injured us. But JESUS calls us to love one another as he has loved us--and he has loved us when we have hurt him. He has loved us when we have injured him. Jesus has loved us through thick and thin.

You might say, "I can't do that! I can't love someone who hurts me."

And you would be right.

You can't love people who hurt you--except by the grace of God.

It's God's grace, after all, that makes it possible for God to love us--even when we hurt him--even when we break his heart. And it's God's grace that makes it possible for us to love the other person through thick and thin. It takes a miracle to do that—and miracles are God's business. When we feel angry and vindictive, we need to pray for that miracle. We need to pray for God's grace so that we can do what is not natural--that we might love one another through thick and thin. If we are connected to God through Jesus, the impossible becomes possible. Let me clarify something though. When Jesus calls us to love one another, he's not calling us to become a doormat--to become an enabler of unacceptable behavior. If a husband is abusing a wife, Jesus does not expect her to continue to take the abuse. She might need to leave--but she can continue to pray for the man who has hurt her. She might even need to call the police--and that's compatible with acting in love. In the book of Revelation (3:19), Jesus says that he chastens those whom he loves. So when we chasten an abuser, we are loving as Jesus loves. Let me read these words by Philips Brooks, a great preacher from another century.

Brooks said:

"Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men and women.

Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, but pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle.

Every day you shall wonder at yourself—at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God."

Here's the key to all things. Jesus is connected to the Father--and calls us to be connected to Jesus so that we too can be connected to the Father. Jesus says, "Remain in my love--abide in my love." If we will do that, two things will happen:

- o Jesus will fill us with joy.

- o And Jesus will help us to love one another, so others can experience that same joy.

So let us all love one another as he has loved us! Amen!