

YOU DID NOT CHOOSE ME

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

May 17, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 119:1-1, John 15:9-17

Edwin Markham's lovely poem "Outwitted" is one of my favorites.

He drew a circle that shut me out -
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout
But love and I had the will to win
We drew a circle and drew him in.

Just about everybody wants to be inside the circle, to be included, chosen. Even if we like our solitude, or don't care much for the approval of others, it's still nice to be recognized for our talent, our ability, our good looks, our wisdom, something that sets us apart.

We become aware of our need to be included early on. A group of kids get together on a basketball court and choose up sides. The kids with the most ability, the fastest on their feet, the tallest, the most nimble, get snatched up early in the bidding. The kid who is clumsy or awkward is left for last or never chosen. And the message comes through. The circle is drawn and someone is left out.

It's that way for boys, I know, and for girls it *may* be athletics that create that same feeling of being left out, or maybe it's just not being included in some special group of friends who are too self-important to include you. The birthday party that you're not invited to attend. The play date that is never reciprocated.

It's not fun to be left outside of the group. To have someone draw a circle and shut you out.

Which is why I have never been very comfortable with the exclusivist approach of some Christians whose idea of sharing their faith is like choosing friends for a pick up basketball game where only the talented and most able are included.

When I was a kid in high school, there was a national Christian organization that had an outreach to teenagers. It was very big in the Midwest. Their mode of operation was to target the captain of the football team, the head cheerleader, the president of the student body, the prom queen and draw them in; get their commitment and build a sphere of influence that depended on the fact that the *most cool* kids were a member of that Christian group. It stood to reason that if they belonged, everyone else would want to as well.

Today, teenagers are more complicated sociologically speaking, and leadership is more complex than being identified as having athletic ability or good looks. If there is anything that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold taught us at Columbine, it is that *being left out* is a place where *heartbreak and evil* enters in. I doubt that the model of choosing the most able and the most gifted still works very well among high school kids. Kids are

more cynical than that these days. And kids are pretty tough themselves about drawing circles that shut others out.

It's interesting that Jesus chooses an insider circle of Twelve who become his most trusted friends. Ironically they are Twelve who are distinct *outsiders*. Matthew was a tax collector, a social outcast. James and Andrew, Peter and John were fishermen, an uneducated class. Simon, one of the Twelve, was a Zealot, or a Sicarri as they were known, a word meaning "dagger" to signify the knives they carried under their cloak. In modern parlance they were gang members, given to political assassination of Roman authorities.

We have learned in recent years with closer reading of scripture that there was actually a much wider group than just the inner circle of Twelve. Women were among the close followers of Jesus, women who traveled with him, women whose presence among his disciples caused his opponents to take umbrage at the breaking of such social conventions. In Orthodox Jewish circles even today women are not allowed to study the scriptures which is man's work. For women, the interpretation of scripture is proscribed.

They were an unlikely group, these insiders chosen by Jesus. Not a particularly educated or polished set. Not a scribe or rabbi among them. No Pharisees or Sadducees to represent the theological parties of the day. No one among them who was carefully schooled in the scriptures except in the most common of ways by synagogue attendance. And in the case of the fishermen who represented a third of them, synagogue attendance may not have even been a part of their life. Fishermen of that time were not an exceptionally observant lot in that regard. They were not the kind of men who were given to theological inquiry.

And Jesus himself, was not of the upper classes, not an educated man in a formal way. He was a carpenter, a tradesman, having learned his father's craft. Whatever he knew of formal religion he had learned in the synagogue in Nazareth. It was local, Galilean, separate from the prevailing winds of controversy in the center of the vortex, the Temple's controversies in Jerusalem where the political, social, economic, and religious issues of Roman dominance over Palestinian occupation, in a first century sense, were being worked out.

When Jesus came to the holy city of Jerusalem, it was one of the Twelve, Nathaniel, before he became a part of the inner circle who asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"¹ And so the social sophisticates and religious elite of Jerusalem must have wondered what this carpenter from the outback might have to offer that could attract a crowd of such ardent followers.

They were, in a word, an unlikely lot. The least likely sort of rag tag army that could have been gathered in such an out of the way place to bring about the most important change that the world has ever known, the good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹ John 1:46

“You did not choose me,” Jesus said, “but I chose you.” And what interesting choices he made.

If you were going to start a new world religious movement, don't you think you would try to gather the most influential, powerful, thoughtful people you could? Maybe you would try to find the captains of industry, or the most eloquent writers, the most gifted teachers, Nobel laureates, important scientists, P.R. people, press agents.

We see this exercise every four years, when a new administration is forming. We've seen it in recent months in Washington. You put together a team that is the most able and gifted and wise and respected and creative and loyal that you can assemble.

But not Jesus. Jesus gathers together a group of *friends*, that's what he calls them in the passage today, “I have called you *friends* he says,” who are in so many respects the least likely people you could imagine. Not promising. Even controversial.

And then at the end of his life they prove to be ever so human. You remember how they abandoned him in the garden the night of his arrest, and how one of them betrayed him, and one of them denied him three times, and all the rest of them went into hiding for fear of what might happen next. Some friends.

“You did not choose me,” Jesus said, “but I chose you. And I have called you friends” And you have to wonder what he saw.

Of course, we should not misunderstand what it is to be *chosen* in a Biblical sense. It means to be set apart to fulfill a calling. Chosen to do a special work of God's appointing. Not set apart for special honor, but set apart for special tasks. Moses, Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Jesus... all chosen not for the honor of the thing but for the trust that God would place in them.

And God chose Israel, too, a light to the nations, a people through whom God's love of humanity might be made known. Not an easy job.

And so it was with Jesus' choice of his disciples as well. “You did not chose me,” he said, “but I chose you.” Outsiders, they were. The least likely. Nobody wrote in their high school yearbook, “Your name is going to be in the Bible.”

And the fact that they were the least likely is good news for us. Because in the choosing of Jesus' closest circle, his followers, his disciples, the Inner Twelve and all those others about him... when he chose *them*, he chose *us*.

Because there is about each one of us an *unlikeliness*, an *off-centeredness*, a *least-likely-to-be-chosenness* (to make up a word) that is precisely the thing that God *sees* in us and *loves about us*. And why? Because it is that that most makes us human and therefore open and receptive and ready to respond to God's invitation to follow. It is only those who are strong in the broken places who will be able to go where he wants to go, or follow where he will lead us.

We think *we* somehow chose God, chose Jesus, got saved, claimed the promises of faith, apprehended the teachings. When in fact it's the other way around. We are chosen by God, claimed by God, apprehended by faith, seized by love. It is not something we set our caps to find and go and get. It is instead something that gets us. "You did not choose me," Jesus said, "but I chose you."

It was former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold who once wrote,

I don't know Who -- or what -- put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone --or Something --and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."²

You did not choose me, Jesus said, but I chose you.

Last night I performed the marriage ceremony of Lee Baler and Jesse Sherman. The wedding was at the Century Club and for me going there was a visit down memory lane.

I was twenty five years old and graduating from Union Seminary here in the city. I had applied to about seventy five churches in the hopes of receiving a call, but I found that there were not many positions available for a person with no experience, even someone as able as I thought I was.

The only church that didn't send me a rejection letter sight unseen was the First Presbyterian Church in New Canaan, Connecticut. I remember the dinner where I met the members of the committee that interviewed me. It was a beautiful home, with a cook who served and cleared the table. There was some kind of red sauce that was on the meat, and when the woman came by to lift my plate before dessert, mine was the only place with red stains on the white linen tablecloth.

I did not own a suit. I only had a sports jacket and a selection of two ties. But I had put on my best and made an appearance.

Over dinner, people were talking about where their children were in school. Choate and Hotchkiss, Andover and Exeter, and I had never heard of these schools, so I knew not to even ask. You know, "if you have to ask, you can't afford it."

They liked me, it appeared, but I left that evening not at all sure that this was the right fit for me. After all I was just a kid from the Midwest. I had graduated from Central High School in St. Joseph, Missouri, and I had no pedigree to make connections among such a connected congregation.

To my surprise, they offered me the call to become Associate Pastor. But I still was not sure. It just didn't seem like the right fit. So I asked to meet the pastor Guthrie Speers in the city. And he said to join him for cocktails at the Century Club on Fifth

² Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings*.

Avenue at 6:00 the following evening. Now I had never had cocktails before, and certainly not at the Century Club in New York.

So there I was again in my sports jacket and the other tie I owned, meeting Guthrie in the library of that McKim, Mead, and White architectural splendor with its grand windows facing Forty-Third Street and Fifth Avenue. We had quite a view of the people below us on the street moving to and fro. We had drinks, Silversmiths, I think they were called, and we talked. Guthrie had a cup with the name of Theodore Roosevelt, a former member. I had a cup with the name of Franklin [Roosevelt].

I confessed to Guthrie my bewilderment at what the committee might see in me, and what I could bring to such a privileged community; my Midwest background, my lack of a pedigree, my public school education. Surely there must have been a mistake. What could I offer in such a circumstance as that?

Guthrie listened thoughtfully and patiently, and having heard me out, finally said, “You don’t understand. The church is growing with lots of people coming from the South and the Midwest, and they don’t have Ivy League degrees or long pedigrees. But we want to minister to everybody in the church, and *you* know where they have come from and what they aspire to. We think you would be a perfect fit, and you would bring a lot.”

And I thought it was all about my good scholarship and preaching ability and biblical knowledge... But who of us is to know what it is about us that God most needs and wants, or why God has drawn a circle so large that it draws us in?

Do you know why God loves you the way God does? It’s not what you think. It’s more than you think. It’s because whatever we are, or whatever we are not, God welcomes all that we are, loves all that we are, and invites us in.

Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I have called you friends.”

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