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I CHOSE YOU

On the night of his betrayal and arrest, Jesus said these words to his disciples. “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you. . . .”

Some of the very best and some of the very worst moments of my life had to do with being chosen. Or not. I remember when I was a kid, my friends and I used get together and play basketball in my driveway—because I happened to be the only one among us who had a basketball hoop, which hung on our garage. About four to six of us would get together after school or on a Saturday, and the first order of business, was to decide which two guys would be the team captains. After that, the team captains would pick their teammates.

Now, you may not be surprised when I tell you that, even as a kid, I was short. God bless my late, beloved, 4’ 10 inch high *Memere* for passing along to me her vertically challenged genes! And something else you won’t find surprising is that short people aren’t the most desired players to have on basketball team.

Yes, I was eventually chosen to be on one of the two teams—I think not so much because the team captain wanted me, but because someone had to choose me since I was the one providing the basketball hoop. Had I not been fortunate enough to have a basketball hoop in my yard . . . well, let’s just say I’m very glad my father bought me one because it pretty much guaranteed that I would eventually be chosen to play in in those games, even if it was after the more desirable players had already been picked.

It’s a painful thing—and very bruising to one’s ego—to not be chosen. To be left out. To be considered the least valuable person. But what a radically different feeling it is to be among the chosen! That feels so much better! When I was in seminary I decided—with much fear and trepidation—to take Greek so I could read the Gospels and epistles of New Testament in the original language they were written in. I was never very good at learning a new language. In fact, I flunked French in Junior High School. I remember the French teacher saying to me, “Fred, how could you flunk French with a last name like Gagnon?”

So my self-confidence about being able to learn Greek—which I assumed

was much harder to learn than French—was pretty low. But, praise be to our good and kind God, it turned out that I had no trouble learning Greek. In fact, I did so well that at the end of the year my Greek professor chose me to be his Greek tutor! I couldn't believe it! It meant so much to me that I was chosen for such a significant position.

Yes, it's a great feeling, and a wonderful experience, to be chosen. To know we're important to someone else. To know that we're valued by them. To know that we're desirable, we're wanted, even needed by another person. Being chosen, or not being chosen, is important stuff, and it can have a deep and lasting impact on our lives, for better or for worse.

In this morning's lesson from John's Gospel, we read that the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Chosen One of God, has selected us. Jesus has chosen you and me, not simply to be his servants, but to be his friends. And the most amazing thing of all is that Jesus has chosen us to be his friends without our having to seek his friendship, and without us choosing him. We have done nothing to earn or deserve Jesus' friendship. Jesus' friendship comes to us totally by his initiative, and his alone.

But that's the way God works, isn't it? God's love, God's grace, God's covenantal relationship with us in Christ, is completely one-sided. In the same kind of way, being chosen as Jesus' friend is also one-sided. We had nothing to do with being selected by him. He simply reached out to us and said, "You are my friend;" and the only thing for us to do is to simply receive Jesus' friendship and respond faithfully to it.

How incredible is that? And how wonderful! Think about what that means. It means that we, you and I, are precious to and valued by Jesus, the Son of the living God. Which totally makes up for not being picked, or being picked dead last, when the team captains are choosing sides for basketball. Of course, sometimes it's uncomfortable to be picked, to be one of the chosen. Sometimes we feel like a mistake must have been made when someone says to us, "I choose you."

Have you ever had the experience of being told by someone that they love you, or that they think you're very special, but you have a difficult time accepting their statement? Not because of something the person who said it was doing, but because of what you're doing by doubting that person, or by your feelings of unworthiness or inadequacy, or because you hear a little voice in your head telling you how valueless and undeserving you are.

Maybe that kind of experience, that inner struggle to accept and believe that you are worthy of being loved and accepted, is going on inside you right now. Maybe you came here to church this morning with those feelings and

thoughts swirling around in your head and your heart, and you're beginning to wonder if maybe they really are true.

Sadly, it's very common for people to go through life turning away the love and acceptance of others, or rejecting those who have chosen us, because of the things going on inside us: our insecurities, our pain, our fear, and our lack of faith. Someone tells us, "I choose you," but we don't accept it as genuine because we're afraid the love and friendship they're promising us isn't valid, and that person wouldn't have chosen us if they knew the "real me," the hidden, dark side of me.

What if that person discovers the truth about us—whatever we believe that truth to be—and ends up rejecting us when we need them the most. And what if we're being chosen, not because of who we are, not for ourselves and our intrinsic value, but because the person who has chosen us wants something from us? Like the nice basketball hoop that's hanging on the garage of the not very desirable basketball player.

Many of us are so frightened, so anxious, so doubtful and suspicious about the genuineness of our being chosen that, even when we are chosen, we don't feel the joy that being chosen should give us. Why do we do that to ourselves? Why do we allow that to happen? Not everyone is a user. Not everyone is a liar. Not everyone wants to put us down or see us fail. Sometimes the people who choose us have good and sincere intentions. In other words, sometimes we're chosen by others for no other reason than they want to choose us. They genuinely care about us. They really do love us.

Well, this morning, allow me to share some wonderful news. Some joyous news. Some good news. We have been chosen! Chosen by Christ, the Chosen one of God. Jesus wants us on his team—not for what we can or can't do, not for what we've done or haven't done, but because he loves us and wants to show his love for us, and through us, to others.

Jesus knows very well who we really are, and still he calls us.

Jesus knows what we have done, and what we're capable of doing, good and bad, and despite that he chooses us.

And get this: Jesus chooses us, not to be his servant, his slave, but to be his friend.

Such is Jesus' love, and God the Father's love, for us. That's what it says in this morning's reading from John's Gospel. In it, Jesus calls those who have been following him and listening to him and trying to do what he tells them to do, whether they have done it well or not so well, he is calling all of them his friends. Listen. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends. . . ."

There are many ways of defining friendship, of course. One definition I heard a while back and really like is that “a friend is someone who knows everything about you, good and bad, and loves you anyway.”

Would that we all had a friend like that in our lives.

But wait, we do! Jesus has called us his friends. He knows everything about us, good and bad, and loves us anyway. In spite of our failings and shortcomings, Jesus has chosen us to enter into an intimate, loving friendship with him. Which means that, whatever we do for Christ and however we serve him, we do it not because we have to or are forced to, but because we want to and are glad to do it. After all, we don't at all mind helping and serving our friends.

So, because of his great love for us, and our great love for him, we would do anything for Jesus, our best friend. And maybe, if we're called to do so and it becomes necessary, maybe we would even offer our friend Jesus the greatest gift we're able to give; the same gift he gave to us: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

And should we not be called to lay down our lives for Christ, perhaps we might at least be willing to give a significant portion of our lives over to him. Because that's what good friends do for each other. Not because they have to, but because they want to. Not because they're obligated to, but because, in their great love for each other, they choose to. Jesus has chosen us to be his friends. And that compels us to choose Jesus to be ours.

So, as you leave here today, go knowing that Christ has chosen you, that he finds you worthy, he values you, he believes you're important, and he wants you for a friend. Then rejoice in it! Experience the joy of Jesus' friendship that Jesus desires you to have!

And then, for the icing on the cake, choose to make other people your friends, no matter who they are, or what they're about, or what they have or haven't done. Love them and befriend them as our Lord has commanded us. Because that's what our friend Jesus wants us to do, and that's what he has chosen us to do. To the glory of God. Amen.