

GOD'S FROZEN CHOSEN

January 3, 2010

Texts – Psalm 147: 12 - 20
John 15: 9 - 17

It's my favorite sermon title – *God's Frozen Chosen*. There aren't many places where you can dream up a sermon title like and be certain that when the day comes to preach it your congregation will be shivering in their ski parkas! I love Vermont!

God's Frozen Chosen – what's it about, besides the weather? Well it has to do with those words of Jesus we read in John's Gospel today. "*You did not choose me,*" he says, "*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.*" (John 15: 16) Think about that with me. "*I chose you ...*"

The fear of being chosen, or of not being chosen, starts early. It begins on the playground as teams are devised, and moves to the classroom for teachers to supervise. Did you have "Spelling B's" in your school? We had them in mine; they were awful. Then there were the school dances. One fourteen year old girl talks about her first school dance. It was a well-chaperoned affair where the girls invited the guys. Her entire day was spent working on fingernails and hair and getting the dress just right. "How was it?" somebody asked her afterwards. "Well," she said, "it was actually more fun getting ready than it was being there." Have you been to dances like that?

"*You did not choose me,*" Jesus says, "*but I chose you.*" I chose you. Isn't this one of the wonderful things about our experience of new life in Christ, this sense of being chosen? of being picked? I don't think I'm alone in this. Have you ever had that dream – Carl Jung said it is a nearly universal human dream, almost an archetype – where you dream that you get up one day and go to work or school or wherever it is that you go most days and you start about your daily routine only to realize that you're completely stark naked? I don't think I'm the only one who harbors the secret fear that someday my guard will slip, my disguise will evaporate, and people will see me for what I really am – a fraud and a fake. Not a saint, but a sinner. Do you know what that is like?

"*You did not choose me,*" Jesus says, "*but I chose you.*" And what he doesn't say

because he doesn't have to is: "and I chose you knowing full well exactly who you are, not just who you want everyone else to think you are." I chose **YOU**. You with your faults and your foibles. You with your weaknesses and your compulsions. You with your fears and your anxieties. I chose you.

Isn't it good news? Don't you sometimes just want to shout out, "Thank You!" I do. It is one reason why the fastest growing branch of Christianity in the world today is Pentacostalism. Harvey Cox says in his book, Fire From Heaven, that if present growth rates continue by the year 2020 the majority of the world's Christians will be pentacostalists. Most of them are people of color. Most of them are poor. Most of them can't read or write. They are, to borrow a phrase from the letters of Paul, "of all people most to be pitied." But they don't feel pitiful and they don't act sorrowful. They're full of joy! They dance. They shout. They sing. They pray. And in a thousand different tongues they say, "Thank you Jesus!" Thank you for choosing me – especially the me whom everybody else in the whole world says is just "the least of these." You chose me. And the joy of it just brings tears to their eyes.

"You did not choose me," Jesus says, *"but I chose you."* And it's good news ... joyful, wonderful news ... but then he goes on. *"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."* I appointed you to go ...

Now why is it that what is so invigorating and exciting – this sense of being chosen – is linked up here with the expectation that we will get up and go? Years ago I remember hearing somebody say that it is possible to ice skate down the center aisle of most New England Congregational Churches. He wasn't talking about the weather outside; he was referring to the climate inside. Why is it that those who are chosen by God become so frozen in expressing the faith that God has in them? How does that happen?

In the first centuries of the church, one commentator says, Christians were tried by fire. After Constantine converted to the faith, however, the church was tried by favor. The church flourished under fire, but lost its way under favor. Years after that transition, a Pope said to one of his trusted followers after looking over the great possessions of the church, "No longer can we say, as Peter and John did outside the temple, 'silver and gold have we none.'" And the trusted

friend replied, "And no longer can we say, 'Arise and walk.'"

The church lost something without even fully knowing it when it moved from the fires of faith to the favor of the Emperor and culture. The church still gets lost so easily. Three ways stand out.

The church gets lost between the words "Give me" and "Make me." Remember the Prodigal Son who demanded his inheritance in advance and then squandered it on the 'good life,' only to come to his senses. He returned with the desire to eat with the pigs because they ate better than he. His journey began with "Give me what belongs to me." His life began when "give me" was transformed into "make me as one of your servants." The longest distance in the world is between the selfishness of "give me" to the surrender of "make me." In moving from flames to favor, the church moved from serving the world to trying to control the world ... and in the process lost the gift that the church was called to give.

The Church also gets lost between the words "therefore" and "however." The church that *bears fruit that lasts* is the one that sees the needs of the poor and says, "There is a need and therefore we shall give." The Church that is lost is the one that says, "There is a need, however, it is possible that those people caused it themselves . . . There is a need, however, it would be better if the government would solve the problem . . . There is a need, however, money won't solve everything." The weakness of the liberal church in America has always been that it thinks it is done with a problem once it has identified the problem or explained it away.

Jesus never had time for such nonsense. He turned every argument into action. He spent no time with the illegalities of healing on the Sabbath. He just looked into the pained eyes of another human being and healed them. The church gets lost in explaining, and Christ is crucified again.

So the Church gets lost, I think ... it becomes frozen ... between the words "give me" and "make me," and between the words "therefore" and "however." The Church also gets lost between the shut and guarded gate of Eden, where innocence was lost forever, and the gates of heaven toward which we are called to march, not with orders to conquer, but with an invitation to serve the greatest need we can find in the world.

Mark it well. We get lost between the shut and guarded gates of Eden and those heavenly gates we're called to venture forth towards. Not as conquerors but as servants. This is the church we have seen too often throughout history, the church that wants to control, to dictate, to take by force the world for Christ. In so doing, it becomes the instrument of the Anti-Christ, and it becomes the perfect target for those who want to avoid the demands of the Gospel for justice and peace. "We won't respond to the pleas of the Church for help in feeding the hungry or healing the sick or clothing the naked," people say. "The Church, after all, is just a bunch of hypocrites who exploit the poor and the needy for their own selfish ends. Look at the Crusaders, or the colonizers, or at the television evangelists who line their pockets with the hard-earned money of their listeners." And so they turn away, self-righteous in their self-centeredness.

Oh, we are so easily lost, and we are too frequently frozen. God does not need us to control. God asks us to serve. Let us hear again Jesus' words –

"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. This is my commandment – that you love one another."

God does not need us to take God's place – to explain or defend or by force usher in God's realm. What God asks us to do is to bear witness as servants to the love which has claimed us from our birth. As we begin our new year together, I pray that we will re-kindle the fire in our faith and the desire to serve which comes from the awareness of having been chosen to serve and love and share. May it be so. Amen.