

I Chose You

Jeremiah 1:4-10, John 15:12-27 (ESV)

June 17, 2007

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.” What good news this is! We are here today, not so much because we choose to love God and God’s Christ, but more because God first loved us, made us, and sought us out to be God’s own. This is the gospel: “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Have you ever been left out? Have you ever been left behind? Have you ever been forgotten? Have you ever been made to feel as if you did not count for anything? Have you ever been overlooked, ignored, omitted, excluded, pushed aside, or stomped upon? These are some of the most disheartening experiences in life. You might have discovered this when kids picked teams to play ball and you were not chosen. You might have felt it when an admissions committee at a college turned you down. Maybe you have not gotten a job you wanted. Or maybe you love someone who does not love you in return.

But these all-too-real experiences are not all there is to life. They do not form the foundation of our lives. They do not stand at the core of our being. Instead, as Jesus said to his disciples and so to us, “I chose you.” At the center of our lives, at the origin of who we are and what we are about, God has chosen us in Jesus Christ. There are a lot of things in our lives that try to convince us otherwise. There are a lot of people who would love to take this confidence away from us. Hang onto this verse: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.”

When Jesus says, first, “I chose you,” he is saying that our very origin, the source of our being, is in God’s loving us and choosing us. He is also saying that God’s choice of us in Jesus Christ not only brings us into being but also brings us into the Christian faith, brings us into these relationships, and brings us into the church of Jesus Christ. We are here as the result of God’s initiative to call, form, and mold us together. God thought of us before we existed, loved us before the world was made, elected us to be his people, made the world as a place within which to live out his love for us, gave us a work to do in loving him and each other, called us to be sanctified and holy, and yet calls us to heavenly glory!¹

¹John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988, pp. 88-102.

Jesus says, second, “I chose you and appointed you.” Here is the nature of our Christian lives and of the church: we stand completely and without remainder under the authority and the appointment of Jesus Christ. We do not give God commandments. Instead, we live under the command of God. The word “appoint” has to do with God’s will for our lives taking priority over our own wills for our lives. The same word translated here as “appoint” is translated three verses earlier as “lay down.” Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” Just as Christ lays down or appoints his own life to death, for our sake and for our salvation, so does Christ lay down or appoint our lives to the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ, to the mission of the church, for the sake of the world.

This appointment is not to be taken lightly. It is not something we can ignore. Jesus does not say, “Do it if it feels good.” Jesus does not say, “Do it when it is convenient.” Jesus does say, “I chose you and appointed you.” This urgency of being under orders is part of what it means to be Christian and to be part of the Christian church.

Jesus says, third, “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.” What kind of fruit? This verse is framed before and after with the commandment to love one another. The fruit we are to bear is the fruit of love. The immediate application is within the community of faith. And then it spills over into the world. We are to live and to proclaim the good news of God’s choice of us. We are to extend God’s love into the farthest reaches of the world. Just as Jesus Christ chose us before we chose him, so are we, as his church and the agents of his love, to choose others before they choose us. It is up to us to announce and live the love of God to all people. We have been chosen for this task. We have been appointed to this service. We have been nourished by the love of God so we can bear fruit, nourishing others with the love of God.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.” This verse has been especially important to me. It is not only the starting point of how I think about the church—chosen and appointed—but it also stands near the heart of my personal faith and of my experience of being called into the ministry. I did not volunteer for this. I have instead a strong sense of having been chosen despite my unworthiness, and this verse has been a large part of my being called to be a Christian and of my being called to be a minister.

Thus this verse guards against the temptation we have sometimes to congratulate ourselves on being so smart, so faithful, or so Christian as to choose God or to choose Jesus Christ. Yes, it is important to make a decision for Jesus Christ! And it is even more important to remember that our decisions come within

the larger context of the prior decision God in Christ has already made for us. All our action toward God is response.

Moreover, this choice God makes of us is not simply for glory in heaven. It is for work, mission, evangelism, service, cross-bearing, and stewardship. Being chosen does not mean that we are to sit back and watch the world go by! It means that God has a plan and a purpose for our lives and that he is working in and through us to fulfill and accomplish them. Our being chosen is the foundation for our true and God-given life work, for which we were created and redeemed.

So, this verse summarizes the whole gospel of Jesus Christ. We are told of the origin of our life, being, faith, identity, and church when Jesus says, “I chose you.” We are given the shape, form, nature, and reality of our lives as disciples of Christ and members of his church when he says, “and appointed you.” And we have the content of our Christian life, service, and mission as his church when he says, “to go and bear fruit.” God takes the initiative to love us in Jesus Christ, to call us into a relationship with God and with each other, and to give us the privilege and responsibility of a calling that forms the reason of our existence and the purpose of our lives.

Now, we who have been recipients of God’s love are to become agents of God’s love. Because God loves us, we love others. As God pours out grace upon us, we are gracious to others. We who have received a blessing are to be a blessing. As God forgives us, again and again, so do we forgive others, repeatedly. As the recipients of the benefits of the gospel, we become the agents of the spread of the gospel to others. This is the basic pattern of Christian faith and life.

A number of years ago, I was in my study at the First Presbyterian Church of Toccoa, Georgia. It was late one afternoon between Thanksgiving and Christmas. A woman whom I had never seen before came to my office door and asked whether the church helped people who needed food and groceries. Aware that our funds were depleted, I stood and answered, “Yes, we try to, whenever we can.” I was about to explain that we received several requests every day, that I did not know whether we could help at all right then, and that she might check at some other places, but I never got to that. Suddenly, to my surprise, she handed me \$50.00. She said, “Years ago, when I was down and out of work and hungry and did not even have any food for my kids, this church helped me when no one else would—no one—this church helped me buy some food for me and my kids. I am working again now, I am back on my feet, and I want to help someone else. Please use this money to buy some food for someone who does not have any.” I was stunned! I thanked her. I assured her that we would help someone else. She left, and I never saw her again. I do not even know her name.

Looking back, I had a strong sense of having been in the presence of God. In her voice I heard again the voice of Jesus saying, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink.” She had shown the kind of gratitude and graciousness that can be elicited only by grace. And she gave me a model for the Christian life and for the mission of the church. One who was fed was made able to feed another. One who is loved is able to love another. One who is cared for is able to care for another. One who is ministered unto is able to minister unto others. Those who are helped can help others. This is much of what the church is about in the world!

We prodigals who were lost but now are found, who were dead but now are alive again, we strangers who were no people but now are God’s people, who had not received mercy but now have received mercy, we who were chosen before the foundation of the world, we the church who know the goodness of God in Jesus Christ, we are to share and extend that joyful knowledge of God’s love to others. This is the implication of the gospel. We are fed at the pulpit and the Lord’s table in order to be able to carry the gospel into the world, to feed and nourish others into saving faith. The once hungry woman, who came to church to help others eat, helped me to understand the Christian life and the mission of the church. This is our mandate for mission: “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.” And this is a model for our mission: a woman, having been fed when she was hungry, gives what she has to feed others.

It belongs to the mission of the church to choose those who have not chosen us, to choose in the name of Christ those who have not yet chosen Christ. Indeed, we are to choose those who give us no reason to choose them! This is what our evangelism and outreach are all about—touching people’s experiences of being not chosen, of being passed over, neglected, forgotten, or ignored, touching them with the joyful good news that God has chosen them in Jesus Christ, and giving that news some flesh and blood reality by choosing and inviting and bringing people into this community of the disciples of Jesus Christ, this congregation of the church universal.

In the same way, it belongs to the mission of the church to love those who have not loved us, to love not only the unloved and the unloving, but also and especially to love the unlovable, even the hateful. In that God first loved us, before we knew God, our mission is to love others before they love us.

It also belongs to the Christian life and the mission of the church to serve those who have not served us and may never serve us, to care for those who have not cared for us and even for those who could never care for us, to nurture those who have not nurtured us and never will.

Moreover, it belongs to the mission of the church to touch the untouchables, both literally and figuratively, whether stricken with disease, poverty, hunger, or homelessness. We are to reach to those who are unreachable by anyone else other than an agent of God's love. We can do this here, through our meals ministry and provision of night shelter. Through our tithes and offerings, we can extend this around the world. One year at Easter, a little girl brought \$12 to the One Great Hour of Sharing hunger offering. "I have been saving for a Barbie doll," she said, "but I want to give this to buy food for someone instead." Her parents and I rejoiced, almost cried, and learned a lot from her about the grace of God and about what the old *Book of Church Order* of the Southern Presbyterian Church called "the grace of liberality." How many of us adults give up our most cherished toys and favorite expenditures for the mission of the church, the glory of God, and the feeding of the hungry?

It belongs to the Christian life and to the mission of the church to seek peace with others before they seek peace with us, to take the initiative in reconciliation. This applies within our marriages, homes, and families, within congregations and communities, within our society, and among the nations of the world. Why else is Jesus Christ known as the Prince of Peace? Making peace, at all levels, is part of the life and mission to which we are called.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit." What good news this is! We are told that we, the church, were chosen before the foundation of the world, not only for the privilege of fellowship with God and with each other, but also for the responsibility of serving our Lord by sharing with others this good news of being chosen and of the love of God. Let it be clear that our being the church is not our choice but Christ's choice. Our only choice is whether to be obedient or disobedient, loving or unloving, faithful or faithless, loyal or rebellious. Today is the day, and now is the time, to decide and to act. What will it be? Will we live out the purpose of our being chosen? Will we who have been loved love those about us? This choice is ours—will we accept and fulfill our being called and appointed into Christ's eternal service?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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