

The Challenge of Being Chosen

This is a reflection. I will ask a number of questions, but I will provide you with very few answers, for any answers I present would be mine. I invite you to think about these questions and what your answers would be or what our answers should be as a community of faith committed to Learning, Changing and Growing Together.

Do you remember times in elementary school when you wanted to be chosen? Maybe the teacher was choosing someone who would get to take the class pet home for the weekend, or it was gym class and teams were being chosen for some game? Can you remember the joy of being chosen, or maybe you remember the disappointment of not being the chosen one?

Today's readings from Jeremiah and Luke both refer to the Israelites and the early Christians as being God's chosen ones. In Jeremiah God says "I will put my law within you. Set the very words upon your heart. I will be your God and you shall be my people." In Luke Jesus says "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" These are the stories of our spiritual ancestors. At times when it was dangerous to be an Israelite or a Christian, we believed that we were chosen by God and hence favored, treated preferentially and even protected by God. They were both in times when little gods were to be feared, prayed to with sacrifices and believed to be protectors of those people whom they felt showed proper deference and tribute to them.

In the time of Luke, Jesus had already come to overturn the covenants of the Old Testament and replace them with a covenant based on love. Even Jesus, however in the passage from Luke refers to God providing justice to the chosen people. In this sense, in those times being chosen was about being granted security, good harvest, protection from physical afflictions and enemies, and receiving justice for perceived wrongs. It was a time when gods were heroes to overcome the challenges of an environment where the weather was thought to be controlled by vindictive supernatural forces, armies were supported and endowed with winning battles by opposing gods, and demons caused both physical and mental afflictions that only a god could cure. At times when it was not easy to be a follower, understanding that you were chosen by God likely was a boost that helped you to hang on to your belief, even though doing so could be dangerous.

What do we believe it means to be God's chosen people today? First of all Christianity is not a faith that believes in multiple gods. We believe in one God, Adonai, the creator who has made all things good. Therefore we don't need to be God's chosen people so that we can be nurtured and protected from other gods who might wish to cause trouble and turmoil in our lives. There are no other gods.

If we believe in a creating, loving and nurturing God, then being chosen must be a wonderful thing. How great is it to know that God has created a universe and our home, the earth, for their beloved people, namely us? We live in a world of wonders in so many ways. Physically our world provides us with energy from the sun, water to sustain our mostly water bodies, water and sunshine to help grow the crops that we eat and use to feed our animals, wind to clear the skies and move both good weather in and inclement weather out, and a mineral base that can be used wisely to help us to create and build things that can make our lives safer, simpler and more

comfortable. God has gifted us a creation that is logically based and given us the ability to learn about it and understand it. We are able to use our knowledge of physics, geology, biology and ecology to wisely and respectfully work with creation to improve our lives. The challenge to us is to make wise choices that respect the gifts of the past and nurture and protect those gifts for the generations that will follow us.

But, is that all there is to being chosen? Were we chosen to be spoiled and pampered, live well while others suffer, sit back and smile while God's gifts rain down upon us? Or do we understand that to be chosen is to be gifted also with responsibilities?

If we consider that being chosen, is not only a promise from God to live in a world of safety, ease and luxury, but comes also with a responsibility on our part to work for that same wondrous gift for all of God's chosen people, then the concept, and maybe the challenge, of being chosen can reveal itself.

In addition to stewarding the physical gifts of our home planet, in Matthew 22:37 Jesus directed us to love God and then goes on to tell us to love others, make disciples, repent, and live a life of love that involves forgiving enemies, not judging, and being merciful. He also gave specific teachings on daily life, such as living honestly, not worrying, and treating others with more generosity than expected. Therein, I believe, lies the challenge of being chosen. We are to love others, forgive enemies, not judge but be merciful and treat others with more generosity than expected.

This is not a simple challenge. Loving others challenges us to see the worth and value in everyone we meet. That person who was just rude to you, the person who is mentally ill and may make you feel unsafe, the person who just broke into your home and has left you feeling violated. These are people that for various reasons do not fall into our normal circle of what we would usually call friends. And it will not be easy for us to see them as children of God. Am I suggesting that I can personally achieve this? Absolutely not. I can only try, and it is not easy at all. I am in awe of the saints in our world who make a lifetime commitment to doing just that. They have a strength and conviction that I struggle hard to even touch.

So what can we do? Well, first of all, who needs our help? The poor? The mentally ill? The physically ill? The marginalized members of our world? The lonely?

If we are doing well is it because we are chosen? Are we well off because we work hard (certainly hard work is a contributing factor)? Are we maybe well off because we have privilege? The privilege of good health, good life experience, good social standing?

I have asked lots of questions and given very few answers. I guess this is why this is a reflection. However, I do think we can acknowledge the ways in which our faith community, our Spirit of Hope family is trying to make a difference, to accept the challenge of being chosen. We answer Jesus' call when we help to provide food to the needy through the Garneau Strathcona Food Security program. We support the Inner City Pastoral Ministry in its work with many of our marginalized Edmontonians. We support S.E.E.D.S (Sustainable East Africa Education and Development Society) and its work to provide education and home life assistance to children in

Ethiopia. We have a Prayer Shawl ministry and a Congregational Care committee that provide comfort to those suffering poor health or health challenges, loss of a family member or other distress. We have chosen to be an Affirming Ministry that provides a safe place to members of the rainbow community and advocates for their human rights and accepts them in all levels and roles in our faith community. We host and help to organize the South East Edmonton Community Collaborative that brings aid agencies in our part of Edmonton together to help all of us share resources, and works to promote proper mental health care, protect our health care system for everyone, protect human rights (especially for the marginalized), to speak out against injustice and to work to treat the weakest members of our society the way that we all deserve to be treated. There are likely more ways our community is trying to make a difference, and I know that many of us in our personal lives work with agencies and in other ways to be faithful to God's call. If you are looking for a way to meet the challenge of being chosen, there may be a way for you to contribute in the various activities I have just listed.

I believe that we as a community have accepted that to be God's chosen people is a calling that we have identified in our mission. We accept that there is a lot of hurting in our world, and some of it has been because of misguided acts of the church and interpretations of scripture. In response we have committed to be a place of comfort and healing for those who are hurting. We are trying to be welcoming to people who have not been welcomed elsewhere, we are trying to listen and be compassionate to people who have not been heard. We are trying to accept people for who they are, who have not felt safe or free to be themselves. I am not suggesting that anything is wrong with any of these people, but rather that they have been treated wrongly before. We have challenged ourselves to see everyone who comes in our doors as worthy and chosen people of God.

Finally, who are God's chosen people? Don't we believe that God created all of the world's people in their image? Does that not make everyone we meet, and everyone around the world God's chosen people? Is this the challenge of being chosen? Chosen to make a difference in this world. To try to leave it a better place than we received it. Thankful for the example of Jesus and for being chosen to follow his example and bring some comfort and peace in this hurting world.

Together in faith we continue to Learn, Change and Grow Together, thanks be to God!