

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B | John 15:9-17; Acts 10:44-48

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

May 6 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As people who live in America in the 21st century, we have many freedoms to be thankful for. And with those freedoms comes choice, and the choices we make often define who we are -- or so we'd like to think so.

From the moment we wake up each day, we make choices. Donut or fruit for breakfast? Red tie or yellow tie for work? Dark roast or light roast coffee? Highway or back roads for my commute? Some of these may be easy choices, though some choices we face in life may not be so simple. Save money for later or spend it now on that thing I really want? Have that operation or put it off? Should I finally set up my will, or can I do that some other time when I'm less busy?

Having choices can be difficult, even if we seem to want and seem to have more and more choices in all aspects of our lives -- and what this really makes us think is that we're in control. Sometimes it's subtle, other times it's completely unimportant, but deep down for many of us, I imagine, there is a desire to be in control over our lives. Or at least over something, over *anything* -- so much so that, sometimes, even just choosing what I want to watch on Netflix (which takes a while sometimes) can occasionally make me feel better about some of the other choices I have to make.

Take this to its extreme and we really *do* start to think we're in control of things based on the choices we make. I'll have ice cream and chocolate sauce for breakfast because I can and it's my choice. I'll wear anything I want to work because it's my choice. I'll drive 90 on the highway to get to work because it's my choice. Even in the small decisions, sometimes our choices, were we really to choose whatever we wanted, would quickly see us go *out* of control -- be it our bodies suffering from ice cream for breakfast, our careers suffering from not meeting certain expectations, or our society suffering because we're endangering others. Our choices, clearly, matter for our lives and for the lives of those around us.

And yet it is still our inclination that we have choice over everything in our lives. We have so much choice that even our faith in God and how we express it has taken on a certain amount of choices. We're so accustomed to choice that we often treat God the same way, that we can choose whatever we'd like about God the same way we choose what we want or don't want on a hoagie -- should I be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist? If I choose Christian, should I be a Presbyterian, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian? If I choose Episcopalian, should I be High Church or Low Church? Should I go to the 8am service or the 10am service? '28 or '79 Prayer Book? Organ hymns or guitar praise music? The list certainly goes on, but it also has to stop somewhere. Even if we desire choice, or that our opinions should matter and allow us to choose these kinds of things, the Gospel from this morning would most likely make us pause and think about what we may have thought to be our most important choice. As Jesus begins to say goodbye to his most trusted disciples, even his friends, he gives them an interesting thought to ponder:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you."

There's a lot going on in that one little line.

First, the obvious meaning -- Jesus called his disciples years several years prior to this Gospel lesson. Seeing them fishing on the Sea of Galilee, he called them, chose them, asked them to follow him, and they did. They did not seek him out, but rather they were sought by Jesus for the sake of his mission and ministry in the world. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people," thus bringing more people into the fold. And so it was, they followed him because he chose them.

But let's go a little deeper. Because we have choice, we often fall into the trap of trying to choose the *kind* of god we might happen to like. And what I mean by that is this -- when it comes to expressing what we believe, I cannot tell you how many times I've heard the phrase "well, I cannot believe in a god who does this or that." But is that really a choice

we have? As if we had a real choice as to the attributes of the God of all creation -- the Almighty, the Omniscient, the Omnipresent? And oftentimes when folks do say something like that, they point out something we don't actually believe about our God, anyway. The more limitations we try to put on what God is or what God isn't, the quicker we'll realize that we, then, are in fact recreating the modern day equivalent of the Israelites and the Golden Calf -- choosing a god made in our own image, not the God who has made us in his.

But let us go deeper still. Jesus continues to call all of us to be his disciples, so we must hear this line spoken to us as well. "You did not choose me, but I chose you." It's not that we don't have a say in the matter -- God has given us free will to make choices, after all -- but we, too, must hear his words as the disciples did. We must come to realize, as they did, that this itinerant preacher from Nazareth was not simply a moralist who hoped people would act correctly; he was not simply a teacher who showed them the scriptures in a new way; nor was he simply an example that we ought to follow. No, Jesus is the Son of the living God who came to earth that the eternal God who created all things might be most fully revealed in him, that the world would most fully know the love of God, and that the world would come to have life in him through his saving work on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Of this there is no opinion. That truth is not something that can be put up to choice -- whether we choose to believe it or not can be, but whether or not that is who he is cannot.

But that's also why Jesus says what he says today. Were it only up to us, and we could choose anything we wanted when it came to what a savior looked like, or what our faith tradition claims as true, or what might be asked of us as disciples, we might choose something much different. A faith that makes us feel more comfortable. A god who meets more of the boxes that we'd like to check. But really consider what that would mean -- can you imagine your very life and soul depending on choosing the right god? I can't. At our house we can barely choose what we're going to have for dinner -- hinging our eternal souls on what we happen to think is best is way outside our level of expertise.

I think perhaps this is the most important way to hear Christ's words today. That, of all the choices we do have, one we need not make is who God is and what God does. It is Christ who has chosen us to hear him, chosen us to follow him, chosen us *and given us the choice* to love him. And so we, like his first disciples, saw something in him and heard his call, perhaps deep down knowing that he indeed is calling us in a way that only he could do. The call of God -- that we have been chosen as God's people -- is not something we make up or choose for ourselves but something we hear. Like the voice of the Good Shepherd calling to his flock. It is something that happens to us, like the Holy Spirit descending on all who have heard the Word, both Jews and Gentiles alike. And it is something deep within each of us, for it was put there by our God and Creator from long ago.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you." Thanks be to God that, for all the choices of this life, the most important choice was God choosing us and all God's children -- choosing us to bear fruit for the kingdom of God, choosing us with an eternal love that has been poured into our hearts that we might then choose to love God and one another, and choosing that we may be known by him, the God of our salvation, the author of peace and lover of concord, the one whom to know is eternal life, and the one whom to serve is perfect freedom.

Amen.