

May 9, 2021

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

I Chose You

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We're gonna do a little exercise together. Take a moment to get comfortable, and then close your eyes. Take a full breath; hold it, and then release. Breathe in and out. Feel your breath, feel your muscles, feel the air on your skin, and open yourself to the miracle of your body and your life. Breathe in, and breathe out. Now, become aware of God's presence with you, not just beside you or in front of you, but as close as your breath. Breathe in, and breathe out. As you breathe, bring to mind the moment that God laid claim on your life. Maybe it was decades ago, or maybe it was only days ago. Maybe you remember it like it was yesterday, or maybe your memory is a bit hazy. Maybe you haven't had that moment yet and long for the experience, or maybe you've completely forgotten why you ever believed any of this in the first place. No matter where you are along the journey of faith, just breathe. Breathe in God. Breathe *into* God. Remember who you are, and remember that you – *all of you* – are known and loved by God. And for just a moment, dwell here in silence with God.

John 15:9-17

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

The grass withers, the flower fades; the word of the Lord endures forever.

I used to think of the call stories of the disciples as random events. In my mind I saw Jesus walking beside a lake or the sea and, on a whim, calling out to the fishermen in their boats. I never imagined that it was premeditated or predestined, probably because the Bible doesn't give us any insight into Jesus' thought process, and if I'm being honest, the disciples were never very important to me. At least, they were never as important to me as Jesus, because isn't that what all of this is about? Isn't Jesus who these four Gospels are all about? Isn't Jesus the reason why we're all here? Of course the answer is yes. It's all about Jesus. But I think if Jesus appeared here among us today, he would smile, shake his

head, and gently say, “No. It’s not all about me. It’s about you. I came here because of you. I came here *for* you. I came here because I so love the world.

“And I chose you.”

Friends, that was so hard for me to write, because I was reminded that Jesus’ “you” includes me. Jesus chose me. I can believe Jesus chose you so much easier than I can believe that Jesus chose me. I wrestle daily with my own sin. I’m haunted by the awful things I’ve done, and I’m ashamed of the countless things I’ve left undone. I pray less often than I should for God to forgive me or amend me or direct me to live as the person God created me to be. Sometimes I question why God would ever call me to ministry, let alone love me, and sometimes I struggle to believe that I’m worthy of anything good. And yet, Jesus chose me. The truth may be difficult for me to swallow, but it’s undeniable.

Jesus chose me, Jesus chose the disciples, and Jesus chose you. Jesus chose all of us, and it wasn’t a random choice. Let that sink in. Jesus chose us, specifically and deliberately, to liberate us from our doubts and fears, to liberate us from the world, to say once and for all that we are deeply loved and deeply worthy. Jesus chose the lowest and least of all people to show us where that love begins. He chose for his disciples those living in poverty, those living at a subsistence level, to demonstrate that God’s love cannot be bought or earned. He chose lepers and outcasts. He chose widows and sex workers. He chose doubters and betrayers and he even chose the dead. Jesus chose all those who had been told that they were “less-than” by the empire and those in power. Jesus chose every single person who had ever been told that their life didn’t matter. So to those of us who have ever been told by the powers of this world that our lives don’t matter, hear me: your lives *do* matter, and Jesus chose you. To those of us who live with the daily horrors of racism, racial profiling, and police brutality, Jesus chose you. To those of us who continue to be overlooked and dismissed because of our gender, Jesus chose you. To those of us who risk our physical safety and our jobs to love who we love or be who we are, Jesus chose you.

It’s important to remember that Jesus also chose those in power, not just those who were oppressed. Jesus also chose the oppressors, the privileged, the rich, the powerful, the ones who had the ability to make lasting changes that would profoundly affect the lives of the lowest and the least. Jesus chose Mary of Bethany, a rich woman who faithfully followed Jesus, hosted him in her home, and anointed him for burial. Jesus chose Zacchaeus, a tax collector, and broke bread with him, inspiring Zacchaeus to give half of all he possessed to the poor. Jesus chose Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, and spent time teaching him. And Jesus chose Saul, a man who persecuted and killed countless early Christians, and led him to become Paul the Apostle, one of the saints of our faith. So to those of us who are wealthy and privileged, Jesus chose you. To those of us who have the power and influence to change lives, Jesus chose you. To those of us who may even be the oppressors, Jesus chose you.

That’s why I think Jesus would say it’s about us, because *we* are now the Body of Christ. *We* are now his hands and his feet and his love and his choice in the world. Jesus has enfolded all of us into his ministry of love, and this ministry *requires* our participation. That truth may be difficult for us to swallow, but it’s undeniable. It’s now *our* responsibility to make the choices Jesus chose and to proclaim and live into his specific, deliberate love, most especially for those from whom the world would try to withhold it. But the good news is that God’s love cannot be contained or withheld. God’s love conquers the world, but it doesn’t conquer like rulers or empires or colonizers. God’s love conquers the sins of this world that attempt to separate us from God, from one another, and from ourselves. God’s love conquers greed and apathy and individualism. God’s love conquers our minds and our hearts and directs us to serve and liberate those in the world who have been oppressed and violently abused by rulers and

empires and colonizers. God's love conquers the conquerors. That's what today's texts are all about! *Jesus came to set us free so that we might liberate the world in his name, so that we might bear the fruit of radical, deliberate, specific love, fruit that will last.*

As the hymn goes, they will know we are Christians by our love. The world *will* know us by the love that we give, by our actions, and actions speak loudly. The Church has a long and notorious history of proclaiming one thing and doing another, and our actions have betrayed us and our faith. But I don't believe actions speak *louder* than words. We can't completely dismiss words, because words have immense power. Words have a way of sticking to our skin and burrowing into our minds. Whether good or bad, the words we hear from our parents, our teachers, our friends, and especially our leaders and institutions – those words can become our own, adopted into our internal narrative, telling us that we're not worthy of anything good, that we're not even worthy of God's love. And if we remain silent in the face of injustice and oppression, our silence loudly proclaims, "Your life doesn't matter." A person can spend their entire life either liberated by the words and deeds that have supported and encouraged them or gasping for air as they attempt to excavate themselves from silence and inaction that has buried them alive. So let us loudly and specifically proclaim God's love for all people and live into our identity as people of the Word. Let us write these words of scripture as a seal upon our hearts. Let us follow the example of Jesus, the Word made flesh, and lead with love. Let us love radically in thought, word, and deed. Let us deliberately love God with our whole heart and mind and strength. Let us make the specific choice to love our neighbors *and* ourselves. And most of all, let us remember the words of our Savior: "I chose you."

Close your eyes once more and get comfortable. Take a full breath; hold it, and then release. Breathe in and out. Feel your breath, feel your muscles, feel the air on your skin, and open yourself to the miracle of God's love for you. Breathe in, and breathe out. As you breathe, consider how God is leading you to choose love, and name the barriers preventing you from loving. Breathe in, and breathe out. As you breathe, ask yourself if you're a Saul or a Paul, if you're the oppressor or the oppressed. I know that might be hard, but trust and believe that Jesus chose you. Breathe in, and breathe out. As you breathe, remember that Jesus chose every single person who had ever been told that their life didn't matter. Breathe in, and breathe out.

To those of you who have ever been told by the powers of this world that your lives don't matter, your lives *do* matter, and Jesus chose you. You are strong and resilient and worthy. Breathe in, and breathe out. You are the Church, the living Body of Christ. Breathe in God, and breathe out racism. Breathe in God, and breathe out sexism. Breathe in God, and breathe out homophobia and transphobia. Breathe in God, and breathe out division. I am so proud of you, and I love you. Breathe in God, breathe *into* God, and remember that Jesus chose you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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