

Choosing vs. Chosen

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 16, 2021

based on John 15:9-17

A lot of ministers tell dramatic stories about how they were called to the ministry. They discovered they had a special gift, maybe, or a precipitating awakening -- some sort of kum-bi-ya moment like Isaiah had in the temple in Jerusalem. Well, I didn't have any of those.

My plan, in fact, was to be a college literature professor but I was warned away from it because the conventional wisdom in the 1970s was that there were few jobs in the field since the college populations were shrinking as the Baby Boom generation thinned out due to age. So I decided to go to seminary and broaden myself by picking up a master's degree in religion on my way to getting a PhD in English.

Well, my life kind of happened on my way to *not* completing those plans. I needed a summer job as the school year ended and I had a terrible time getting one. I'd apply for jobs in churches as a youth director but no one would hire me because (though I was in seminary) I wasn't headed for the ministry. By June I was the only one in my class *not* to have a job, and then a very late posting of a position came to the seminary. A church in Lakeview, Oregon needed a pastor for the summer. Not a youth director; a pastor. They hired me sight unseen to be a kind of bridge interim and instead of staying three months, I remained stayed seven.

I bonded really well with those people. Maybe it was because all my grandparents had died before I was old enough to get to know them and the church was full of people the age of my grandparents. You know how if you don't get something essential in life one way, you find a way to get it another? I don't know.

I resisted going back to seminary at the end of that gig. I'd fallen in love with Oregon as young people do who discover their first entirely new place, so I went to the U of O in Eugene and did a master's degree in literature and film.

And that was fun. The stress level was very low. I enjoyed the city and my friends there, but I was maturing some, and the lazy life of a grad student became less and less appealing. I remember one day a professor from the film program called me into his office. He told me he wanted me to do a PhD under his direction. He had taken the time to map out a program for me that would make that happen in a year and a half.

He was all excited for me. And the strangest thing happened. Something I can't account for now any more than I could account for it then. He was busy going over the details of the program and I interrupted him and said, "Bill, I have to get on with my life."

Something much larger than I, was tugging at me and had been tugging at me a long time, I guess. Looking back now I see that my life would have been a whole lot simpler had I just finished that program -- but simpler is not what life is about, right?

The essence of this is at the heart of the scripture this morning. Jesus is having a last chat with his twelve friends and he has something very important to wake them up to. They are burdened with the pressures of the day. Things have changed recently. Their popular teacher, Jesus, is under great threat. What are they going to do? Did they make a mistake when they left their fishing boats and decided to follow him months or years before?

So Jesus, seeking to calm the waters they're floundering in, says, "Hey. You didn't choose me. I was the one who chose you."

For the disciples, it's a reset. They thought they've been in charge of their own fate all this time. They thought they'd signed on for something like, you know, a 5 year hitch in the US Navy that included 2 years of education and a year abroad; something that was all lined out for them. That's why they're floundering. They had been so in awe of this fellow. They still are, in fact, but the enterprise is not getting the traction they expect. What's going on?

St. Augustine who is remembered for giving us the unfortunate doctrine of original sin is also remembered to have said something beyond profound about the choices that we make. He said, “The heart has its reasons that reason does not know.”

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Sometimes we sign up for something that hooks us in a deep place and then we wonder, like Don Ludwig said he wondered a year and a few months ago on his first day as full-time preaching pastor at Southminster: “What the hell did I do?”

I had a young friend who had been going out with different guys for years. She’d find herself evaluating them; thinking a particular fellow might make sense as a life-partner for a reason like, he was a home owner. Or, he seemed good with children. Or, he had a good job.

This was a perfectly rational approach – but none of them ever panned out. Finally she went on a hunting trip with this *new* guy who was like the 20th fellow in a series – a hunting trip, which was not something she had ever done before (or ever considered doing) and at one point while following him quietly through some brush, she had the uncanny, deeply visceral sense that she was going to have children with this man. And that’s just what she did.

Now nothing prepares you for something like that. All you know is that you’ve encountered something bigger than you are. The heart has its own unique logic.

I have felt that kind of crazy inner-nudging a number of times in my life. I bet you have, too.

You know, there are so many self-help books and articles out there to “help” you make choices in life – help you choose partners, or careers, colleges, subjects to majors in, towns to retire to.

But you know what? It's simpler than that. And it's also more complex. Again, we're talking about matters of the heart here, matters that have to do with who we are in our core --

You know this, right? You have a weighty decision to make and you sit down with pen and paper and you make a list of pros on one side of the sheet, and a list of cons on the other; however, if you really engage yourself in this analysis, eventually you toss the thing aside. Why? Because one weighty and conclusive reason on one side of the sheet may outweigh a dozen reasons on the other side.

We never know all the reasons that compel us in our life's journey nor do we know what we will discover along the way if we are engaged – why? Because the heart has it's reasons that reason doesn't not know."

There is a very old Russian tale about this process that involves a folk character called the Baba Yaga. The Baba Yaga is an ancient woman with a wild visage who lives deep in the forest. She sits in a little hut stirring a pot – and she knows all things. Those who seek her are driven to her by some particular fear; by something that is rearing its head in their world. She requires them to go into dark places in their lives; to ask hard questions, to step out of the world of logic and reasonable analysis into something deeper.

In the tale, a young seeker comes to the door of Baba Yaga very fearfully. Baba Yaga asks him, "Are you on your own errand or are you sent by another?" The young man, encouraged in his quest by his family says, "I've been sent to you by my father." Baba Yaga promptly throws him into her pot and cooks him.

Next comes a young woman. She sees the smoldering fire beneath Baba Yaga's pot and hears her cackle. Baba Yaga repeats her question: "Are you on your own errand or are you sent by another?" The young woman has sought Baba Yaga herself and has found the way through the forest to the hut all by herself. She says, "I am on my own errand." With that Baba Yaga promptly throws her into the pot and cooks her, too.

Next a third young visitor arrives; another young woman, one who is deeply confused by the world. She sees the old crone's house and smells the acrid smelling smoke coming from it and knows this is dangerous. Baba Yaga confronts her and once again, asks, "Are you on your own errand or are you sent by another?"

The young woman answers truthfully: "In a large part, I am on my own errand, but, also in a large part, I come because of others. And, in a large part, I have come because you are here, and because of the eerie beauty of the forest, and also because of something I had long forgotten, and, you know, in a large part, I have no idea why I have come."

Baba Yaga takes a moment to size this young one up, and then says, "You'll do."

And she invites her into her hut.

I'm talking here of the way we reorient ourselves in life by first becoming disoriented. That reorientation always requires opening your mind and heart to new ways of thinking. Yes, and life itself will do that to you.

I remember one afternoon playing with my young daughter. We were busy building something using Duplos. You know – they're like Legos but they're bigger so they're easier for small children. My daughter must have been 3, maybe 4. She was very articulate and had been so since she was two.

I don't know how the subject of her birth came up in our conversation. I might have said something playful about having picked out just the right daughter for our family. But my daughter shook her head and said, "No," that wasn't how it happened.

She said that before her birth she was standing on what she called a rainbow bridge, and she looked down and she saw how lonely we were and she chose her mother and I to live with and be her parents.

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

You know, there is a great deal of emphasis in fundamentalist, evangelical circles of faith to “find Christ,” to “find your Savior,” almost like he was lost or hiding from us or something. For many Christians, there is a conversion moment in one’s life when that individual chooses to “follow Jesus.”

Now, I’m not saying anything is wrong with that, but there is built into the genuine spiritual quest, whatever religious avenue it goes down, the idea that we can search and search and search, but unless we are found and have a strong sense of being found by whatever force that is yanking on us, it’s not going to be conclusive in our lives.

When I was thirteen I went with a friend to an evangelical revival summer camp. It was led by a preacher who scared the bejezuzz out of us, talking about Hell -- I was so frightened I went forward at the altar call. When we got back from the camp I began going to that man’s church and they had altar calls after every sermon in that church, too.

But something about it puzzled me, because every week the same four or five people went forward again and again. And I wondered – didn’t it take? I wondered what was going on. Pretty soon after that I found the Presbyterians and I discovered the concept of grace.

I learned from them that while faith is important, what is crucial above everything else, is the profound grace of God.

This is why we have the audacity to baptize babies in the Presbyterian church. I baptized 6 of them last month. As soon as people in my Utah church found out I was leaving, they lined up to have their babies baptized.

Many churches have a rule that says you have to wait until you are old enough to make a profession of faith. But we don’t wait for children to grow up. In baptism we acknowledge that the grace of God is conclusive from birth.

In fact, God reaches out to us before we are born. And when we enter the world, God puts a claim on each of us that never ends and we celebrate that in baptism.

So often what we take away from a self-help book or even a Bible text is, “It’s all up to us.” And there’s no problem with that. It’s good to have a fire built underneath us once in a while, but in this morning’s text Jesus senses an anxiousness in his disciples and says, “Hey, people, relax; you didn’t choose me, I chose you.”

Quite a few years ago, a popular Broadway play was turned into a movie starring Richard Dreyfuss. It was called, “Whose Life Is It Anyway?” In the movie, a man who is an accomplished sculptor is in a car accident and ends up a quadriplegic. He decides the best alternative left him, since all he can do is speak, is to be allowed to die. He resists efforts by doctors, family, and friends to control and direct his choices. He cries out in anger, “Whose life is it anyway?” The implication is that our lives are our lives. We are the owners and creators of ourselves. “This is *my* life, dammit!”

Now, of course, there is a lot to recommend that way of thinking. None of us should be at the mercy of some medical system that treats us like a number. None of us should be controlled by people who care little for us, but, at the same time, each of our lives is bigger than we are. No person is an island. We belong to others and they belong to us.

With that as the bottom line, Jesus, in today’s text, adds a little something that models for us a different example of leadership. Jesus says this to his friends: “I don’t call you servants any longer . . . instead I call you friends.” He blurs the boundaries between them. The lines between rabbi and disciples, leader and followers get smudged. There is now a reciprocity, a greater mutuality, a shared vulnerability.

Jesus acknowledges that they all need each other. He chose these fellows and the women who we know were also part of the core of his community because of who he knew they could become together.

In closing let me say, I feel thoroughly chosen for this position. However, I am pretty sure the search committee didn't pick me because of who I am now. They picked me as someone who they perceived could become what Southminster will need to move into what Southminster is already in the process of becoming -- something Don Ludwig has been helping birth over the last year. Let me acknowledge how grateful I am for this new partnership with him – I couldn't be happier.

You know, every time I begin working at a new church, at some point, early on, I realize that I am still the pastor of the church I just came from, and I need to step-it-up to be the pastor the church I've been called to will need. I'm sure that will happen here, too.

It's like we are all feeling our way along toward the future in the dark. We'll be okay, as long as we don't take anything for granted and we are patient, we will find our way together.

It's like that in a marriage as well.

It's a reality we all awake to, from time to time if we can see what life or God is doing to us.

"In case you didn't notice," says Jesus, "You didn't choose me. I chose you." There it is.

Thanks be to God,

Response: short guided meditation

maybe you've already done this, but take a moment and lock onto moment when you had an important decision to make – decades ago, last year or last week ; when you abandoned logic and you went with your heart.

Maybe it was the best decision you ever made – or maybe it wasn't so good.

In either case, it was defining, right? It was a choice that was probably uniquely you.

What life would you have had, had you gone another way?

Can you embrace your present life fully, because of how you navigated your past?

Ram Dass

“I would say that the thrust of my life has been initially about getting free, and then realizing that my freedom is not independent of everybody else. Then I am arriving at that circle where one works on oneself as a gift to other people so that one doesn't create more suffering. I help people as a work on myself and I work on myself to help people.”