

Sermon Series: Life in Christ: Chosen, Blessed, Broken, and Given

Sermon Title: Chosen

John 15:13-17; Genesis 16:1-13; 16; Acts 1:1-16

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We live in a world that is skeptic about faith, a world that is becoming ever more contentious, and a world in which words and acts of hate dominate the news cycle. And then we hear the words of Jesus again, speaking as clear to us today as when he said them to his disciples 2000 years ago, "I chose you." We are God's beloved. And God offers us Life in Christ because we are chosen and beloved. The question becomes then, what do we do with this offer? How do we accept it?

When we think of the word, chosen, what comes to mind? One of the first things I remember as a child is being chosen by self-proclaimed baseball captains for their teams. Each captain would take a turn picking players for our sandlot game. Usually I was the last or near to the last one to be chosen because I just wasn't good at hitting or catching a ball, nor did I care. I just wanted to play the game and have fun. This past week the NFL had its annual draft in which the teams chose new players to infuse their rosters with new talent. Diehard football fans were keeping a close eye on these choices. Choosing one person over another seems to be part of our everyday life. We choose who will be the next president of our country. We choose who will get a job or we are chosen for a specific position. We have grown up experiencing either being chosen or being not being chosen. Last year at Annual Conference, delegates were chosen to serve this May at the General Conference, the United Methodist policy making body that meets every four years. They will choose the future of The United Methodist Church by considering thousands of petitions, some with history making implications. One of the issues this General Conference is same gender inclusiveness. Please be in prayer for the nearly 1000 delegates who will be making these choices from May 10-20. The choices we make as individuals or as a group of people can impact the lives of many.

From our Hebrew Lesson, Sarai, the wife of Abram, made some choices that have impacted the world as we know it today. Sarai was a faithful wife. When God called Abram to leave his home in Ur and travel to Canaan to establish a new home, Sarai went with her husband. God promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:2) and that he would have as many descendants as stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5), but there was one problem. Sarai was infertile. Any woman who has dealt with infertility issues understands the pain and frustration of not being able to conceive. For women back in this ancient time, bearing children was their sole purpose in life. A woman's life had no value if she could not bear children, especially sons. So Sarai becomes concerned how Abram will become a father with many descendants if she cannot give him babies. After all, God chose them to start a new nation. So Sarai does what seems to be the most logical and acceptable thing in this ancient culture, she offers her slave, a young girl named Hagar to Abram. Polygamy was acceptable back then, and it was not uncommon for wives to give their husbands their slaves for the purpose of pleasure and procreation. We know little of Hagar except that Sarai acquired her at a young age when she and Abram were in Egypt. Some scholars speculate that Hagar was in her teens when Sarai gives her to Abram. Have you noticed that Hagar did not have a choice in this arrangement? To us as 21st century monogamous North Americans, we cringe at such an arrangement. Well, Sarai's choice works. Hagar becomes pregnant. One would think everyone would be rejoicing! Not so. A cat fight occurs between these two women. Young Hagar flaunts her pregnancy which stirs up jealousy in Sarai. She becomes infuriated. Hagar may be the one who is pregnant, but Sarai being the first wife holds the power in the family. After consulting with Abram who relinquishes his responsibility to Sarai, she proceeds to send this young pregnant girl into the wilderness to die. This not only happens once, but twice in this Abraham saga. The second time it happened was after Abram and Sarai are given new names by God, Abraham and Sarah. Finally Sarah becomes pregnant in her old age and gives birth to Isaac. When Sarah witnesses Ishmael, Hagar's son, and Isaac playing together and building a brotherly relationship, she orders Abraham to send both Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness to die. Again, she becomes jealous of Hagar and her son, and again she has them sent into the wilderness to die. Both times God comes to Hagar's rescue. Both times God saves her and her child. Both times God promises that Hagar's son will become a father to a great nation and have many descendants. God fulfills God's promise to Abraham through both of his sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Both become fathers of nations and

his descendants are as many as stars in the sky. History tells us that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can trace our lineage back to Father Abraham.

As a mother I admit that I am disappointed in Sarai (Sarah) whom we call the mother of many. I am disappointed that as an older woman she did not have the spiritual maturity to recognize that both she and Hagar were chosen by God. I am disappointed that she lowered herself to become resentful and jealous of a young girl whom she gave to her husband for the sole purpose of giving him a son! I have asked myself, what would I have done if I was in Sarah's sandals? I hope I would have seen Hagar as a sister or a daughter, or even a granddaughter with her son as a member of our family, and that we could have rejoiced together over his birth. But Sarah did not. She saw Hagar and Ishmael as competition that needed to be annihilated. Her behavior has me asking these questions. What would the world be like today if Sarai would have diffused Hagar's flaunting of her pregnancy by being excited for Hagar and her future child? What would the world be like if Sarai treated Hagar as a daughter or a granddaughter, and celebrated the fact that there would be one child among them? What would the world be like after Sarah would have worked at fostering the brotherly relationship between Ishmael and Isaac rather than destroying it? What would the world be like today if Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac could have learned to live as one family, respecting each other, loving each other, and honoring that each had been chosen by God to be part of God's larger plan? In my humble opinion we are reaping the results of Sarah's choices 5,000 years later. Today there is still hatred and hostility among the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, and it is growing rather than diminishing. Sarah's choices are a warning for us to honor the chosenness in each other, because it can have huge ramifications that we cannot even begin to imagine.

Jesus told his disciples, "You did not choose me but I chose you." Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, and Jesus' disciples were chosen for a special task. In our competitive world, we have the ones who are chosen, and the ones who are not. Usually when we think of being chosen, we think that the one chosen is better than the one who is not chosen. Sometimes one is not chosen not because one isn't good enough, but because there was someone who was just a little better. When Jesus said, "I chose you," he didn't mean that his disciples were any better than anyone else, nor were they the elite. To be chosen by Jesus does not mean Jesus rejects others. To be chosen by Jesus means that he accepts each person's unique, God-given qualities. Jesus chose his disciples when the world did not. To be chosen by Jesus means that Jesus sees us as precious. To be chosen means that Jesus sees us as something beautiful that has eternal value. We are chosen by God. We are chosen because we each have unique-God given qualities. Every person is God's chosen, no matter where one lives, what language one speaks, or what one's belief system is. Each human is chosen by God because each person is God's unique creation.

This Sunday the church remembers Jesus' Ascension into heaven. Some may say, "So what?" Well, if Jesus remained on earth, he could only be at one place at a time, but by returning to the heavenly realm, Jesus has the ability to be at all places at all times with all people at the same time, therefore all space on earth is holy and all people are holy. There is an Ascension tradition in England called "Beating the Bounds" in which the priests, town officials, and both the young and old of walk the boundaries of the parish on Ascension Day. This was done for both practical reasons as well as spiritual ones. Before there were maps, the practical reason was to check the boundary markers to see if bordering parishes had encroached upon their boundaries. The old taught the young where these boundary markers were. When they came upon them, they would beat the boundaries with sticks. The spiritual purpose was to publically acknowledge that the land and the people were holy, that the presence of Christ was among them. Scriptures would be read, songs sang, and prayers offered for those who lived within the boundaries. On Ascension Day through the Beating of the Bounds the people in the parishes remembered that they were chosen and Jesus was present with them wherever they walked. By Beating the Bounds on Ascension Day, these English villages were remembering their life in Christ as ones in which they were chosen by God.

Have you ever given any thought about your life in Christ as one of being chosen by God? How does that make you feel? Frightened? Special? Loved? How does this idea of knowing all of us being chosen change your view of your family? Your community? Your world? Embrace your chosenness, give thanks to God for it, and then be aware of the responsibility we have to honor the chosenness in others.

Resources: *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen; *She is Worthy* by Marjorie Kimbrough; *Slightly Bad Girls of the Bible* by Liz Curtis Higgs; "Ascension: Standing on Holy Ground," by Greg Moore posted on www.ministrymatters.com

