

I Have Called You Friends

Romans 8:28-30; John 15:12-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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This week's topic in our ongoing Faith Questions series has to do with what it means to say that we are "chosen" by God.

I'm going to get to this question, but this Sunday I felt that I needed to at least address some of the events of the last week or so and this volatile cultural moment we find ourselves in.

As you likely are aware by now, things in our nation and in our province are feeling a bit tense these days. Whether it's the ongoing protests in Ottawa and Coutts and an increasing number of Canadian cities or the ongoing disagreements around pandemic restrictions and when/how they should be lifted, it seems like the mood of the day, for many, could be described as anxious and angry.

On Saturday morning, I poured a cup of coffee and the first two stories that I came across in my tour through the morning news were about the "uncivil society" that Canada was at risk of becoming and about how friendships are being severed over how people think about the trucker convoy.

I'm not going to tell you what to think about the trucker convoy. I have my political opinions as we all do, but in some ways, I feel like the last thing we need right now is more opinions hurtling around, jostling for space in our overwhelmed brains.

I *have* been thinking a lot about the role that we, as Christians, ought to have in this difficult moment. I have few illusions that our discourse is going to turn more civil overnight. Even if Covid restrictions were lifted tomorrow, I suspect that we are going to be living in the context of bitter division for some time.

So, what shall we do? One of the things that regularly grieves me as a pastor and as a Christian is how quickly and easily followers of Jesus simply fall in line along political lines.

Liberal Christians say liberal things. Conservative Christians say conservative things. Our discourse is polarizing and hostile, with one side being entirely right and the other side entirely wrong (and often wicked).

In the midst of all this I wonder: Who is saying Jesus things and in Jesus ways?

Who is even attempting to take a step or two toward those who think differently? Who is trying to walk a mile in the shoes of those whose views they find distasteful, even offensive? Who is trying to understand in ways that we would wish to be understood?

Christians claim that Jesus is the one to whom we owe primary allegiance.

Well, Jesus engaged everyone from Roman centurions to prostitutes and tax collectors to rough-around-the-edges blue collar fishermen to religious leaders to Samaritans.

He didn't bless and baptize everything these people said or thought or did, but he did seek to meet them squarely where they were, to try to get on the inside of their experience.

Jesus was a very determined boundary-crosser. His followers should be, too.

We, of all people, should be the last ones to resort to caricatures of those who don't think like us. We, of all people, ought to be those trying to get on the inside of people's experiences and pain and uncertainty and asking, "What might the love of this particular neighbour look like in this particular context?"

Nothing is easier than taking cheap shots and labelling those we disagree with in self-serving ways. This is a very easy path to take, and many take it.

But I *firmly* believe that it is the task of followers of Jesus to take the harder path—to recover a view of those we disagree with as neighbours instead of enemies.

There simply is no other way forward that doesn't simply entrench our various positions, and preserve our hopeless categories of "the good and right people (which always includes me)" and "the bad and wrong people (which always includes other people)."

If we who follow Jesus won't at least attempt something different, who will?

Ok, on to this week's question about predestination and what it means to say that God "chooses us." We are swimming in deep theological waters today.

The person who asked the question referred to a sermon that I preached last August. I had been talking about what it means to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

My sermon that Sunday was largely autobiographical. I talked about how my thinking about "working out my salvation" had changed over the course of my lifetime. At one point, I quoted the Roman Catholic priest and popular author Richard Rohr:

Until you come to that time in your life when you choose that you have been chosen, when you accept that you have been totally accepted, the real process of personal transformation has not begun.

I also said that as I've gotten older, I have increasingly thought about faith "not as something that I chose but something (or someone) who chose me. I began to think a lot more about grace."

Could I expand on this thought? Well, sure. At least I can try.

What does it mean to say that God chose me or that God chooses us?

Am I making a claim about Christians as distinct from everyone else? About salvation and eternal destiny?

Am I talking about who's in and who's out? About the degree of control that God exercises over human beings and over all of creation?

Our passage in Romans would seem to suggest this, right?

For those whom he foreknew he also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

Predestination is a big, scary theological word, often associated with John Calvin and Martin Luther and the theological systems that have grown out of the Reformation.

In simple terms, it is the doctrine that everything that happens has been willed and predestined by God. It is often extended to the realm of salvation—God determines who will be saved and who will be damned.

Even Luther and Calvin weren't particularly fond of the idea that God chooses some and not others, but they believed that passages like this one in Romans demanded it.

Mennonites, by contrast, have not historically been known for our strong views on these matters.

If we have talked about it, it hasn't been very flattering. We've always stressed human freedom over divine providence.

Mennonites historically insisted that human beings always have the choice to take up our cross, to follow Jesus, to choose nonviolence instead of war, to choose baptism for ourselves instead of having someone do it for us.

Freedom of choice matters hugely to Mennonites. It has right from our beginnings. We have not tended to bother with creating elaborate theological systems that presume to explain precisely how God's will and human choice fit together.

We've sort of just said that our job is to do what Jesus said, to follow his teachings, to decide for ourselves. Jesus seems to assume in the gospels that we have the freedom to choose light or darkness and we've taken him at his word.

Indeed, the broad narrative of Scripture seems to assume that God has given us meaningful choice. We could cite specific examples like Joshua telling the people of Israel choose for themselves whom they would serve, or the consistent call of the prophets to return to God.

Yes, there are certain verses here and there in the bible that can be used to claim that God determines everything that happens, but the broad arc of the story the bible tells makes little sense if we believe that God has decided every detail in advance.

And even beyond all this, the assumption of human freedom makes sense of our everyday experience. We live lives where we daily choose this and not that. We urge our kids to make good choices. Our legal and moral systems require the assumption of freedom.

It doesn't *feel* like our every decision is being controlled and constrained by some divine puppeteer and while it's risky to do theology based on our feelings, our lived experience isn't nothing.

So, what did I mean when I said that I have increasingly come to think of the life of faith as less about something that I choose and more about who has chosen me?

Am I a bad Mennonite? Well, probably, but for reasons other than this one! ☺

For starters, I think that all Christians, at least on *some* level, believe that God's will and God's action precedes our own.

I do think that the most extreme form of predestination—that God specifically chooses some for salvation and damnation—is wicked and unworthy of the God made known in Jesus Christ.

But *all* Christians believe, at least on *some* level, that God can be trusted with our ultimate future, that God's will *will* ultimately be done on earth as in heaven.

At *some* point, however distant in the future, this will mean that God's will trumps human wills.

Disagreement comes with how we think of God's will and action in the meantime.

Some feel that God gently steers our wills gently, seeking to persuade rather than compel, working with human freedom.

Others think that God exerts more force upon our wills, at times, even contravening human freedom (indeed, it would seem that we often hope for this when we pray, don't we?).

Both views have problems.

People who believe that God controls and chooses everything that happens in our world struggle to articulate how we can think about God as good.

If God controls everything, that means all the bad things that happen in our world and in our lives is God's will. Many struggle to believe in a God that could deliberately *will* the horrors that our world has seen.

(It is a very difficult view to hold pastorally! Most of you will know the story of Fred Preston by now [I'll share more during prayer time].)

I cannot *imagine* saying to Fred's wife and daughters that it was God's *specific* will that their husband and father be taken from them in this way. And yet, I have known people who do indeed take comfort from this view.)

By contrast, people who emphasize human freedom struggle to articulate how we can think about God as sovereign and powerful.

It's great that God allows us to influence the story in good and bad ways, but if human freedom is the ultimate force in our world, what guarantee do we have that God's will *will* finally be done on earth as in heaven?

There are troublesome ditches on both sides. But this is one of those cases where I think that the best approach is both/and not either/or. There are important truths in both perspectives.

Our freedom is real and meaningful.

God's action precedes and sustains and guides our own.

God promises a future beyond anything we can choose or bring about on our own.

All of these things are true, even if we can't quite figure out how the puzzle pieces fit together.

We must acknowledge that we are in the realm of a deep mystery here, that we both choose and are chosen at the same time.

It's also worth asking what predestination for? Is it so that some get goodies and not others?

When we say that God chooses us does that mean that we are chosen for a privilege or a purpose?

If we look at Romans, it says that God has predestined that Christians will be conformed to the image of his son (echoed in Ephesians).

And what is the image of his son? Well, it is many things, but most basically it is defined by self-sacrificial love toward friends and enemies.

This is what we have been chosen for.

We have not been chosen to the exclusion of all others, nor have we been chosen because God likes some people better than others.

What was true of Israel is true for the church. We have been chosen to bear God's purposes in the world, to participate in God's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

God has chosen a community to play this role. As it says in Romans, Christ is the firstborn of a large family—one that is always getting larger!

God has predestined not that some are in, and some are out but that there will be a community that will bear his purposes in the world.

I made up my own definition of “chosen” this week. I will close by submitting it to you in the hopes that it might be helpful.

To say that we are “chosen” is to say that each one of us is “created, loved, and summoned with divine intentionality.”

Created: you were *meant* to be, in all of your unique individuality.

Loved: God loves you, personally, even unto death

Summoned: God invites you and everyone to live into this creational intent, to bear fruit, to imitate Christ in life and in death thus bearing witness to the deepest meaning and hope of the world.

Yes, God chooses specific people for specific tasks at specific points in the story. Moses, Esther, David, Mary, Paul... the list could go on right to the present.

But on a broader level, there is a sense in which there is not a person alive or who has ever lived who has not been chosen.

And there is not a person alive who is not invited to choose that they have been chosen.

In our passage from, John Jesus says these words: “You did not choose me. I have chosen you.”

He says these words to his disciples, but by faith we also believe that he says them to us, all these years later. *I have called you friends.*

And the friends of Jesus seek to do what Jesus commanded in the confidence that God’s ultimate purposes are being accomplished in the process.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but each of the Faith Questions sermons thus far this year have echoed similar themes.

Whether we’ve talked about Covid controversies or the songs of sinners or Christians’ chequered history in evangelism, we have always bumped up against the uncomfortable truth that human beings are limited and finite and sinful.

We often don't even seem capable of having civil conversations much less solving some of our deepest problems, to say nothing of saving ourselves in the ultimate sense!

This is why I so often end with grace.

This is why I said in that sermon in August that the older I get the more think of faith as being about the One who chooses me more than anything I choose.

This is why I ultimately have hope that God's will will trump all of ours, however that looks.

When I was a younger man in university and graduate school, I spent an enormous amount of energy defending human freedom and, by extension, the goodness of God in the world. It mattered *so* much to me that I could articulate a system where it all fit together.

I'm glad I made the effort, but now that I'm a bit older and I've seen a bit more in the world and I've seen a bit more of human beings in action, I'm not as excited about defending freedom as I am in the grace of God.

When everything that could be said has been said, the gospel of Jesus Christ is fundamentally about the God of the universe reaching down to sinful humanity and, in Christ, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And ultimately, it is God who will judge, heal, and forgive this wounded creation and we who have contributed to it.

When I use the language of being "chosen" by God, this is what I mean.

May God help us to choose that we have been chosen. Every day and in every way.

Amen.

