

## Jeff's reflection – July 11

In the scripture reading we heard from Ephesians, the author tells people that God has chosen them, and destined them for adoption.

I want to consider that idea of being 'chosen'. I think it makes a difference whether we think we are chosen, or we think we are THE CHOSEN.

The word 'the' is a little word, but it can make a large difference.

For example, if you are 'a winner', you are including amongst the other winners. But if you are 'the' winner, then you are the only winner.

Similarly, there is a difference between being chosen and being 'the chosen'. If you are 'the chosen', it implies you have a special responsibility and perhaps special privileges. By implication, everyone else falls in the category of the unchosen.

Historically, The Chosen often are tempted to get everyone else to assimilate to their view of the world, their plan for the world, their management of the world.

But, 'being chosen,'- rather than being 'the chosen' - is a bit different. As a hockey fan, I've been watching the NHL playoffs and have heard the commentators sometimes say about a player, "He was chosen 3<sup>rd</sup> overall in the 2017 draft, or he was chosen in the second round of the draft etc...."

They could say that for everyone who is playing, because every player was, at some point, chosen by a team.

I think that distinction can be helpful when we read today's words from the letter that the apostle Paul (or perhaps one of Paul's followers as scholars are undecided as to whether Paul was the actual author) wrote to church communities in the city of Ephesus in the first century.

Paul was writing to give them courage and faith for being an alternative community. Paul was writing to remind them of their identity as people chosen by God to be the presence of Christ in Ephesus.

He wrote to people living in Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the largest cities in Asia Minor. Originally a Greek city, it had come under the control of Rome in the year 129 BCE. Ephesus was impressive. It was located near one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Temple of Artemis. It was the home of the 2000 square foot library of Celsus, third largest library in the Roman Empire. The city had a theatre seating over 20,000 that hosted both theatrical productions and gladiatorial contests.

There were also six Roman-created aqueducts constructed primarily to provide water for Roman baths in Ephesus. Aqueducts were an engineering feat, structures rising into the air, moving water great distances; visual proclamations of Rome's mastery not only

of people, but of the earth and its water sources. Everything succumbed to the power of the Roman Empire.

Anyone living in Ephesus was inundated with ever-present evidence that this was Rome's world, ruled over by Caesar, by an Emperor who often was described as being either the son of God, or an adopted son of God.

But in Ephesus, were small communities whose loyalty was not to Caesar, the Son of God, but to Jesus, the Son of God; not to the Lord of the Empire, but to their Lord Jesus Christ. Their faith was not in the Father Caesar, but in the God and Father of Jesus Christ. (Note: many of the terms the early church used to refer to Jesus were terms that were typically used to refer to Caesar and were used to contrast Jesus to Caesar. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn't!)

Paul wrote to Christian communities existing amongst the prominence of Rome on display in Ephesus – if this was a contest in the gladiatorial theatre between the Christian communities and Rome, the smart money would be on Rome!

But remember, the Paul who introduced Jesus to communities throughout the Roman Empire, was the Paul who said God's wisdom is found in what appears to be foolish – in a crucified Saviour. Paul says, don't let the smart money tell you where to place your faith.

Because says Paul, you have been chosen – God has chosen you, God has adopted you – you think you know who you are -your family history, your parents, your siblings, your uncles and aunts...you know the family to which you belong...but know that you also belong to another family...God's family...God has chosen you. Moreover, don't be impressed when you hear that Caesar is God's adopted son, because God has adopted 'you' – as daughter, as son, as child of God.

When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptizer, we are told that the voice of God named Jesus as God's Son, as God's beloved. Then Jesus began to gather a community, began to heal, began to tell stories/parables, began to invite others to gather around a table and share food, began to restore people's ability to walk and see, began to restore people to their communities; began to name others as daughters and sons of God, began to tell people that Jesus was the beloved because everyone was God's beloved. Jesus revealed he was not 'the chosen one' but he was the one chosen to tell us that we are all chosen! We are all chosen by God. God has chosen us to be God's children, God's people, God's creation, God's beloved.

God has chosen us to gather all things in heaven and on earth. To gather everything into this deep love of God; to understand the world and to live in the world out of a faith that this is really God's world; to gospel the world, to good news the world...to reveal that we belong to and in God.

Those who are chosen by God in the Biblical stories are not chosen because they are the best, the brightest and the most promising. Those whom God chooses are quite human, quite flawed, quite given to acts both of courageous faith and of self-centered ambition. Peter walked on water...until he sank. Paul himself was first known to Christian communities as the enemy who was hunting them down.

They were chosen, not so much because of what they could accomplish, but because of what God might accomplish with them and through them.

They were somehow containers of God's spirit, carriers of God's presence, vessels of God's love, ...somehow, God was both with them and in them.

Jesus welcomed people into God's *chosen-ness*: fishers, tax collectors, the poor, the lame, the woman who debates theology with him beside a well, the ostracized, a centurion, Nicodemus the Pharisee, Mary and Martha, the children, the women, the men ...welcomed them as those chosen by God to share the good news that God chooses all of us, God adopts all of us, we are God's.

Paul wrote to communities in Ephesus to remind them not to be gathered into the Roman Empire, but be gathered into God's love, and then to gather the people of Ephesus into God's love.

We can read the letter to the Ephesians as words of encouragement and inspiration to first century faith communities and then we can allow the letter to 'read us' to invite us to ask, "If Paul were writing today to faith communities in Winnipeg – if Paul were writing to the faith communities participating in this summer series of shared online worship – if Paul were writing to Spirit Path, Trinity, Westminster, the United Church in Meadowood, and Transcona Memorial – what would Paul be saying to us?"

Let me suggest a couple of possibilities:

Today, Paul would remind us that we are chosen, but we are not 'the chosen.' Author Harvey Cox, formerly a professor at Harvard's Divinity School, participated in a number of interfaith dialogues and gatherings – Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews. Cox observed that such dialogues turned into debate and disagreement when they focused on the differing faiths beliefs, creeds, and doctrines. However, when he said they shared their personal experiences of God, Allah, the sacred, the transcendent or the spiritual, then they found commonalities of experience and of questions. We are chosen amongst all the chosen, so as followers of the way of Christ, we live our faith in the spirit of Christ, and we share our experiences of the sacred in Christ, and we listen to the experiences of other faith communities. Especially today in Canada we are reminded to listen to the spiritual experiences of Indigenous peoples, as we learn from and with one another, as we honour the sacredness in which we all live.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who taught a course called Religions of the World at Piedmont College in Georgia. She says that people should be taught that the Golden Rule includes honouring the neighbour's religion as they would have the neighbour honour theirs. Brown tells of a minister who, during a sermon, suggested to her congregation that Christianity was one way among many ways to God. After the service a man came up to her and asked, "If God isn't partial to Christianity, then what am I doing here?"

Brown goes on to comment, "I wish ordinary Christians took exams, so I could put that

question on the final. As natural as it may be to want to play on the winning team, the wish to secure divine favoritism strikes me as the worst possible reason to practice any religion. If the man who asked that question could not think of a dozen better reasons to be a Christian than that, then what, indeed, was he doing there?"

Chosen not for divine favouritism but chosen for divine love and to express divine love in our living and our relationships.

Two: Paul would remind us that this faith grounded in Jesus the Christ will call us to an alternative way of life to the way of life that is grounded in practices of domination, practices that think peace is found in the creation and accumulation of weapons of mass destruction; in practices of extracting and exploiting God's creation – God's water, soil, minerals - for human consumption and monetary profit. Our faith grounds us in an alternative practice of respect, non-violence, of sharing and blessing, and of practicing the sacred stewarding of God's sacred world.

Third: And Paul would remind us that in Christ we have inherited a way of living out our chosen-ness as people who follow the way of Jesus: who embody healing; as people who seek a sharing of resources so that all have enough and none have too much; as people who constantly expand our tables in order to welcome any and all to God's table; as people who ask God to give us the courage to forgive, and as people who see the sacred , the image of God, in everyone.

We are chosen to live the good news that we live in God's love, that God's love lives in us, and that we can choose to live in a world in which everyone has been chosen as a child of God.

So, whether we live in Ephesus or Winnipeg, or any other community we can name- wherever we are - let us be open to God's spirit in Christ; let us believe that we are chosen, that everyone is chosen; that we are companions of the beloved one of God who welcomes each of us as God's beloved; let us remember that we are children of the Creator, the Sacred, the reality we call God, and that we are called to share the love of God we experience in Jesus, the one we name the Christ.

Thanks be to God. AMEN