

Sermon

“Trust in God’s Choices”

January 26th, 2020 ~ First Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Based on Ephesians 1:3-14 and Matthew 4:12-23

SCRIPTURE:

Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory. [NRSV]

Matthew 4:12-23

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵ ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their

nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Holy God, let the glow of your Spirit illumine those places where we hide in the shadows, trying to avoid the life-changing confrontations with you that worship can, and should, bring. So take away our foolish “Do Not Disturb” signs, meet us in our places of need, and continue to speak to us through your Word proclaimed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

A Moment of Humility and Confession

During my time with you here in Covington, I have begun a few of my sermons by explaining where my mind was at and how I got from there to the sermon that particular week ... well, here I go again:

First, during last Sunday’s adult Sunday school class, we talked about the many historical creeds and confessions that our denomination has adopted over the centuries and that are published in our PCUSA *Book of Confessions*. And, relatedly, we had a good discussion about the vocabulary differences between what is a “confession” versus an “affirmation,” because it can get more than just a little confusing that in our worship services we use the term “confession” in relation to prayer and asking for forgiveness, and we use the term “affirmation” in relation to our recitation or reading, in part or as a whole, of one of our many historical creeds and confessions (our *Affirmation of Faith*).

And, as that discussion has hung in my mind during this past week, I realized it would be appropriate to hearken back to that conversation about “confession” versus “affirmation,” and in the true spirit of “confession,” I would like to share in a moment of personal confession about an incident that occurred on my way to Covington last Sunday morning—a moment that provided me with a much-needed sense of humility, perspective, and in an unexpected way, a reminder of who God is...

After 16 months of driving back and forth from Suwanee to Covington, a span of time that includes almost 350 roundtrips, I was finally pulled over for speeding while on my way here last Sunday. I was near the halfway point of my trip and was

driving on a nice four-lane stretch of road between Grayson and Loganville—you know, the type of road that feels more like a racetrack than a highway. Of course, immediately upon seeing the police car I attempted to slow down rapidly, hoping to avoid being caught. But, unfortunately, as I passed the police car, it's blue lights immediately lit up and I knew I had been nailed, which turned my insides into all kinds of twisting and churning and discomfort—anyone who has ever been pulled over by a police officer knows the feeling to which I refer.

Well, the police officer was a man named Officer Donnelly and he was one of the most friendly and professional public servants I've ever interacted with. He followed the normal protocol, before taking my license back to his car, he greeted me at my driver's-side window, informed me of the speed I was driving, and asked me why I would be driving at such a high rate of speed.

Well, in those split seconds, I considered whether or not telling him I was on my way to church would get me off the hook. But, alas, I opted for the truth and told him that, while nowhere near being in a fit of road rage, I was guilty of competing (racing) with other drivers and cars around me ever since about 6 or 7 traffic lights back, particularly “the jerk in the car next to me.” He sort of giggled and said he had indeed noticed the car next to me going at the same illegal speed.

So then he spent about 8-10 minutes in his car before returning with my license and the speeding ticket. But, before asking me to sign it, he said, “Mr. Barnes, I want to ask you a question and I want you to give me an honest answer. If I would have pulled over the other driver instead of you and asked him why he was driving so fast, what do you think he would say?” Instantly, a feeling of humility and shame washed over me, and I said, “Sir, he probably would say he was trying to drive faster than the jerk in the Subaru.” And, in response, the officer said he appreciated my honest answer, and proceeded to politely tell me that I wasn't any more of a jerk than the other guy, or even himself—that we all make mistakes—and that we all eventually get caught. Then he said he was only giving me a warning and asked me to slow down from now on.

We Are God's People

I spent the rest of that drive, most of last Sunday, and good portions of this past week thinking about that exchange with Officer Donnelly. Not only was I thankful

beyond words that I got off with a warning, but as I said earlier, I quickly realized that he provided me with a much-needed sense of humility and perspective, and although he likely didn't know it, he also unexpectedly provided me with a reminder of who God is and who we are as God's people.

Because here's the truth that Officer Donnelly spoke last Sunday ... he's right that no one is more of a jerk than the next person. We all make mistakes. All of us are flawed, broken, and prone to lying and cheating and hurting other people. We are all ordinary and unworthy and not-good-enough in the eyes of someone. But, we are also capable of being compassionate, caring, and doing extraordinary and wonderful and more-than-good-enough things for ourselves and each other. Because the truth is that no matter what—no matter who we are or what we do (or don't do)—we are all part of God's creation. We are God's people, and above all else, we are chosen.

We Are God's Chosen People

As the Apostle Paul explains at the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians, we are God's chosen people because God chose us in Christ. Now, Paul isn't talking about a trivial decision-making process like we might undergo when we try to figure out where we want to go out for dinner. And, Paul isn't talking about being chosen, like in elementary school, when being chosen for something like a kickball team during recess either meant you were chosen first or last or in between, or when you were chosen by your teacher to write your arithmetic on the chalkboard or whiteboard. No, Paul is talking about a primordial, elemental choice by God since the foundation and creation of everything.

God Chooses the Not-Good-Enoughs

Like how once upon a time, God chose a group of flawed, ordinary, unworthy not-good-enoughs as the first disciples—four young fishermen who, despite their age, were actually prosperous enough to own houses and employ hired hands. Unlike many caricatures of them, they were not naïve youth, but were instead established members of their local society. We are told in other gospel stories that Peter's family home becomes the base camp for Jesus and his disciples. And, we know that Peter was married, probably had children, and even had his mother-in-law living in his household. So Peter and the others had set down roots and were

living very different lives from the types of people who followed rabbis around as a way of life. Because we know from 1st century Jewish history that only the absolute best, brightest, most educated men were able to become disciples of rabbis, and the fact that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishing that day long ago instead of graduating the 1st century Jewish equivalent of seminary tells us that all four of these men were considered less than the best and brightest—in other words, they were not good enough, and thus were the most unlikely of candidates for Jesus to recruit.

Yet, Jesus chose the not-good-enoughs—he called them to follow him and he called them to help him change the world. John Calvin believed God called these not-good-enoughs in order to show us that none of us are chosen and called by virtue of our own talents or excellences. They weren't chosen because they were extra special. They were chosen and called because God had already claimed them with the same love and grace as God claims each of us.

Because that's who God is and who we are as God's people. God does the creating. God does the claiming. God does the naming. God does the calling. And, God does the choosing. It is us who does the following, and it is us who does the trusting.

Indeed, we must trust that God has chosen *us*—all of us, not just a special few—not just the Ephesians, not just the Georgians, and not just the Presbyterians (or any other group of folks)—all of us. God chose us before the foundation of the world—before we made any choices of our own, before we proved our own potential or lack thereof, and before we made our first mistake or our millionth. God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless before him in love. God chose us—the same God who chose a bunch of fishermen to be his first disciples—the same God who knows us completely, who formed our inward parts and knit us together in our mother's wombs. That God—the God—our God—has chosen us.

God Chose Us For a Purpose

And, God's choosing does have a purpose, and that purpose is to make us holy and blameless and worthy and whole ... because not a single one of us is holy or blameless or worthy or whole all on our own. We are holy and blameless because God chooses to make us that way—because God chooses to make us capable and worthy and good enough, regardless of how the world may view us. Because God

has an incredibly high view of people, and God believes that people are capable of amazing things.

Once upon a time, God in the flesh—Jesus the Christ—believed that four common fishermen, who weren't anything close to worthy and good enough in the eyes of their society, were good enough to follow him, learn his ways, and help him change the world. And, that's why we believe that despite our own worth or merit or excellences—regardless of who we are or what we have done or left undone—by God's grace we're good enough to follow Jesus, too.

Trust in God's Choices

In closing, I want to leave you with these thoughts ... In a few days, a new month will begin, and that means that the new beginning this congregation has long sought and prayed for will begin very soon. That means our season of transition together will soon conclude. And, just as I said to you all during my very first sermon back in September of 2018, as you prepare for another change of season in the life and ministry of this congregation, I'm mindful that you are likely feeling a mixture of anxiety, worry, and uncertainty as you look ahead. And, that's completely okay. It's natural.

But, I'm also mindful that you have every reason to feel just as hopeful and excited and joyful about what lies ahead as I do. Because I implore you to always remember who God is and who we are as God's people ... God does the creating. God does the claiming. God does the naming. God does the calling. And, God does the choosing. It is us who does the following, and it is us who does the trusting.

May we all trust in God's choices—for ourselves, for First Presbyterian Church, for the future, *for-ever*.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.