

May 10, 2015
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John 15:9-17

Chosen and Appointed

These past few weeks, together with people here, I've been visiting some of our local politicians. We want to introduce—or reintroduce—ourselves, tell them who our church is and what we do, how we are investing in our shared community, especially with our upcoming construction work on the gym. We're inviting them to be a part of that, too. Before all of that, though, we need to hear who they are: "Tell me a little bit about yourself," we'll begin. "How did you get into politics? How was that last election for you?"

It's a tough time for politicians. There's pressure financially and politically, from governing leaders above and constituents below. There have been some very close elections recently. I asked, "What made it close?" Some said, "Well, I first got into office by appointment, with this election I had to prove myself." I confess a little warning bell went off in my head when I heard, "I was appointed." I'm far from an expert, but I know enough about Chicago politics to be wary. I hear "Appointed politically" and wonder, shouldn't people choose? Isn't that what democracy is about? We get to choose?

This certainly seems the idea behind all the recent announcements of candidates for president! Lots of people throwing their hat into the ring for the Republican nomination. For the Democratic nomination, there's the question of whether the one choice is inevitable. Of course, the presidential election itself isn't for another year and a half. The length of our campaign season is in some contrast to Great Britain, a place which had some big news last week. The big news from Britain last week was not just the birth of the new princess; there was a great big election there, but their campaign season began at the end of March and ended last week, because it is limited by law to 38 days. Meanwhile, we still have 550 days go. Lots of time to sort through lots of choices.

It's not just in politics, though, it's in the products we can purchase, all the many choices in the aisles and aisles of great big grocery stores. Consumer choice can be yet greater without spatial limitations. Consider online shopping. I needed a new pair of black shoes recently. (I have more black shoes than I ever wear. Somehow, I still needed another pair.) So I went on Zappos.com. I don't want to tell you how many screens there are for women's black shoes. I clicked, and compared, and considered. It sucked up all this time, and made me feel a little sick. In the end I didn't get any. That's how it is sometimes, the sheer amount of choice can be overwhelming, even, ironically, paralyzing.

I think we know this, on a deep level. I think we know that a surplus of choices can wreak havoc on our psyche, can actually be bad for us. Still, we want to be, we believe we are, the ones who choose. And we think something has gone wrong if we are not. You hear this in a phrase people say sometimes, a phrase that may be used when times are tough. People will say, "I never chose this." It can be said with bitterness, or anger, or simply sadness—"I never chose this." It's a lament, a painful acknowledgement that where and how we find ourselves is not just what we want, or are able to select.

Jesus says something about choosing in the gospel reading today. "You did not choose," Jesus says, a surprising rejoinder to this sense of our own independence and selectivity. "You did not choose me, but I chose you." It's a reversal of understanding, a new statement of terms, a reorientation of who does what, and what comes next. "You did not choose me, but I chose you, and I appointed you to go and bear fruit."

We did not choose, we were appointed. Maybe we should be wary of political appointments, but not this appointment. But like those local politicians I mentioned, who also noted that once appointed, they must show themselves worthy of election, so also our appointment by Jesus comes with a condition. We are appointed that we go and bear fruit. That's the condition. Not just a condition, it's a command—but it's a command that frees us, heals our sickness, removes our paralysis. Jesus' appointment, Jesus' condition, liberates lives conditioned by things we cannot choose, or would not choose, or did not choose.

You did not choose to have a sibling with mental illness. You did not choose the estrangement that's arisen between you and another member of your family. You did not choose for your child to struggle socially, or scholastically. On this Sunday, let us also acknowledge, you did not choose your mother. Some of your mother's choices have blessed you, and some of your mother's choices have hurt you. Sometimes, she had no choice. To all of us, today, Jesus says, you did not choose, you have been appointed. You've been appointed, commanded, to honor your mother, that it may be well with you. You've been appointed to honor the maternal care you've received, from whomever you have you received it. You've been given that command and this condition, bear fruit. No matter whether you are a woman or a man and whether you have children or not—you did not choose, you've been appointed to be motherly, to be one that nurtures and protects, that brings forth life. You've been appointed to love that sibling, that family member, that child, any child, whether they are related to you or not, you are appointed to be in life making and life giving relationships with one another.

You did not choose the relationship that has become the weekly news of city streets, the tense relationship between African American communities and law enforcement agencies, the distrust and fear and inequality. You did not choose that, nor did you choose the neighborhood hospital in which you were born, nor the color of your skin. You did not choose, you were chosen, to be part of the glorious rainbow hue of humanity. You were chosen as a child of God and given a command: become the beloved community. You've been given a condition: care for, recognize, we are all God's children, black or white, Gentile or Jew, police officer or community activist. Love your neighbor, whatever neighborhood they live in.

You did not choose that this neighborhood, this church, have a building in need of reconstruction. You didn't choose to have a crumbling gym, but you have been appointed to care for it, to be the congregation that restores it, to be the people that come together, with the community, to repair the gym. We've been appointed to reintroduce ourselves to the spirit that built that gym eight decades ago, during the Great Depression. That congregation way back then didn't choose for the stock market to fail. Still, they knew who they were as a church, that they needed to build a space for children, for education, for recreation.

We are going to fix the gym. It is who we are and what we are doing, and we are inviting you to be part of it. Last night we invited children into the gym, to watch The Lego Movie. It was an event held for fun, and as a fundraiser for the gym. It was only well after the movie selection was made that it struck me how very appropriate it was. The Lego Movie is about bricks, building, and it's about being chosen, too. The plot revolves around a character who appears to be The Chosen One, the Special. It's odd, though, because he seems so ordinary, and so often inept. Who would ever choose, elect, him?

"You did not choose me," Jesus said, "but I chose you, and appointed you to be fruit." We were chosen, every one of us, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, as Ephesians 1:4 says. That is who we are, the Chosen Ones, all of us. As in the Lego Movie, what is special is not what we choose, but how we are built, how we are created and called, our appointment in Christ, what we can do and are doing, together. Christ chose us, and he is our sure foundation. We are here to build on than that.