

St. James Lutheran Church

Pentecost IV

June 8, 2008

First Reading: Hosea 5:15-6:6

Second Reading: Romans 4:13-25

Gospel: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

How God Chooses

By Richard Holmer

Last Sunday the focus was on the choices we make: whether we decide to build our lives on the rock of Christ – or on the shifting sands of expediency. We were reminded of the very real possibility that exists for getting it wrong as well as getting it right.

This week the focus shifts to God's choices: who, how and why God chooses. Today's readings bear out what God says to us through his prophet Isaiah:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:8-9

Sometimes, it's hard to figure out what God is up to. As St. Paul once remarked, God's ways can be inscrutable. Some of God's choices leave you scratching your head. In our Second Reading we are reminded how God chose Abraham and Sarah to be the parents of his chosen people. What an unlikely couple! As St. Paul describes them, Abraham was nearly a hundred years old, and his body "was as good as dead." Sarah was barren and well

past the age for motherhood. Those two were ready for a nursing home – not parenthood. But God chose them.

And St. Paul was a fine one to talk! Why did God choose Paul to be an apostle? Paul had been an adamant and relentless persecutor of Christians. He was an accomplice to the stoning of Stephen. Yet God chose Paul to be his missionary. Many people have wondered about how Jesus went about choosing his disciples. His selections seem pretty random, and the bar is set awfully low. For starters, he chose four fishermen. Wouldn't one or two have been enough? Yet those four look like all-stars compared to the guy Jesus picks in today's gospel. Matthew was a tax collector. That doesn't mean he was an accountant or a bureaucrat. It means he was a collaborating sleazeball. Matthew worked for the Roman occupiers, gouging his fellow Jews for taxes paid to the empire – and for a little extra for himself. Everybody hated tax collectors – and for good reason. Jesus chose Matthew for his inner circle.

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What are we to make of a God who doesn't think like we do? We know from the current presidential campaigns that it's important for a candidate to think and act like the voters to whom the candidate is aiming to appeal. So Hillary has a shot and a beer, and talks about how she learned to shoot a rifle. Barack takes off his tie and goes bowling. The goal of such behavior? That the voters will perceive the candidate as "one of us," someone we can trust because he or she is "like us."

Well clearly, Jesus was no politician. He wasn't running for any office. He didn't try to curry favor by conforming to the expectations of his audience. Jesus continually confounded expectations, so often he doesn't seem like "one of us."

What are we to think when Jesus chooses someone like Matthew to be one of his disciples? Choosing such a blood-sucking pariah would be like selecting a gang member or a drug dealer or an ex-con to be on church council. Let's just say that if you were a kid, and Jesus lived in your neighborhood, you wouldn't want him to be one of the captains to pick teams for a baseball game. You can be sure Jesus would pick: the skinny kid who always strikes out, the mean brat who won't play unless he gets to pitch, the nerdy kid who doesn't even have a baseball mitt.

Or, think of it his way: What kind of people do we hope will join this congregation? Don't we want people who are talented, responsible, well-adjusted, intelligent, capable and respectable? People who can be productive, contributing members and potential leaders? But who does Jesus hang with? He has lunch with tax collectors, outcasts, prostitutes, ne'er-do-wells.

What are we supposed to think – we who understand that people are both known by and shaped by the company they keep? The Pharisees ask the question on everyone's mind: "What's up with you, Jesus?" The explanation Jesus gives goes like this:

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners."

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So where do you and I fit? Among the well – or the sick? About half an our ago we offered our self diagnosis. We admitted to God that:

- ❖ We have failed to bear witness that God desires to draw all people to himself,
- ❖ We have thought ill of those who differ from us,

- ❖ Our love of others has not been genuine,
- ❖ We're caught up in the cares of the world.
- ❖ We have neglected opportunities to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, mend broken relationships.

Is our confession a ritualized formality – or is it reality, the stark truth about us all? Just how real are we willing to be? We can come here each week and safely confess to being sinners. But would we still come if our names appeared in the police blotter? If we had flunked out of school or been fired for malfeasance? If we had defaulted on our mortgage, cheated on a spouse, had a DUI? How honest can we afford to be about our own shortcomings?

And what are we to think of a leader who chooses to embrace people who are imperfect, discredited, even despised? Maybe we could think:

- ❖ This is the kind of teacher/leader/savior I need – because I know all too well that I am not righteous, but a sinner
- ❖ If God can use a loser like Matthew, maybe God could actually use someone like me – with all my flaws and shortcomings; because that's who God has always used: ordinary individuals with very human limitations.
- ❖ Maybe, for all our talk about being good and doing good, with Jesus it becomes quite clear that no one is good but God. So what you and I need is not a club where we can come to congratulate one another for being good, respectable and successful – but a place where we know we can find MERCY.

We can go to the dentist with a reasonable expectation that we'll have no cavities. And we might get an annual physical and come away with a clean bill of health, more or less. But could we ever expect to show up at worship and be found free of any and all sin? Hardly.

So we always come here in need of mercy. And we confidently ask for it, not just as we confess our sins, but throughout the service.

- ❖ In the Kyrie: Lord have mercy
- ❖ In the prayers: Lord, in your mercy,
- ❖ We come to the table singing, "O Lord have mercy on me."

We also come to thank God that his thoughts are not like our thoughts, that his ways are not like our ways. If God's ways were like our ways, what hope would any of us have?

Jesus called an outcast like Matthew because that is exactly what he came to show us: that God is always reaching out to the unacceptable, undeserving, unsuccessful, unrighteous, unloved. When Jesus called him, Matthew got up and went with Jesus. He went because he saw in Christ a way that led out of his dark and despised state – a chance to move beyond disillusionment and despair.

Frederick Buechner wrote:

"Faith is a word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved."

So it was with Matthew – so it is with us. We are saved by our faith in the God who loves us. It's true for us, just as it was for Abraham and Sarah, St. Paul, Martin Luther. We are saved from meaninglessness and despair, not by our goodness or our good intentions. We are saved by faith in the goodness of God, who loves us in spite of all our unloveliness.

To have faith is to move in the direction of God's great mercy and love.

Amen.