**We Are Chosen**

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Prologue: *When I woke up this morning, I reflected on what I had left out of my teaching today, which was in the back of my mind as I was writing. So I decided to make this caveat before I speak on what I wanted to say on the subject of being “chosen.” I realize that historically, we Christians have taken on the mantle of “chosenness” from the Bible, wherein God calls the Hebrew people his chosen people. Seen as our inheritance, this has historically led to Christians – who took on this chosenness – perpetrating violence and oppression. This includes America’s early doctrine of “Manifest Destiny” which justified colonizing other peoples and instituting slavery at the very beginning of our country. It also includes this country identifying with the Nazis as Hitler rose to power, and the current rise of Christian Nationalism. I just wanted to acknowledge this history of chosenness that we should not be blind to. But it is* **not** *the subject of today’s teaching!*

*Breath Meditation – Cole Arthur Riley p. 11*

Two weeks ago, we read in our lectionary scriptures that after Jesus was baptized by John, God spoke to Jesus: “You are my son, my beloved.” Shortly after that, Jesus is called into the wilderness.

Last Sunday, we heard about how the boy Samuel was called – repeatedly – by God … and he ended up having to tell Eli some very bad news! - tough job for a mere child.

This week we learn about Jonah, who also was called by God to give bad news to Nineveh. Jonah tries to run away from God, gets thrown overboard from a ship in a storm, swallowed by a whale, and then spewed out on dry land – only to have God insist that he still needs to tell Nineveh to repent. Then when the people do repent and God doesn’t destroy them as he had threatened, Jonah gets mad. Somehow, there seems to be a pattern here, which Rev Lataska told us about last week – that sometimes we don’t hear or respond to God’s call – and even run away from it. Lucky for us, God is very persistent!

My teaching today draws heavily on Henri Nouwen’s book Life of the Beloved. He wrote the book for a secular Jewish friend, to try to describe what it means to “become beloved” of God. He describes this “becoming beloved” using the words of the Eucharist: “taken, blessed, broken, and given”. Today, I will put a twist on Nouwen’s concept of becoming beloved by adding our chosenness in community.

 **First,** we are *taken or chosen* by God and by others.

**Second,** we find we are *blessed* as we become a member of a community of belonging.

**Third,** having been chosen by the community, we recognize our *brokenness* as individuals and share this in our spiritual autobiographies and our mission groups.

**Fourth**, we are *given* as we discover our gifts and give them to the community and the world.

Today I will mainly talk about the “taken” or “chosen” aspect of our becoming beloved.

In our Gospel for today, having been chosen by God as the beloved son, Jesus chooses his first disciples: Simon and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John – all of whom were working at their fishing business. These four, Mark tells us, were very responsive. Jesus chose them and they immediately chose to come with Jesus. It was a mutual choosing. Despite these fishermen’s eagerness to follow Jesus, they too are flawed and broken, as we hear time and again in the Scriptures. They vie for power, doubt their ability to meet the demand of discipleship, and in the end, run away and betray Jesus. Jonah’s story of trying to run away from God is repeated in the story of the disciples – and in our stories also.

Nouwen points out that being “chosen” is not all love and celebration. Being chosen means sacrifice – as Samuel, Jonah and Jesus find out. It meant persecution in the early Christian church and for leaders in our time – for the Jewish people under the Nazis, for Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, and Thich Nhat Hahn.
Perhaps we aren’t persecuted or killed for our beliefs, but I wonder if, as each of us reflects on our own history, we might find lesser (or greater) ways we have suffered in our chosenness by God. So many of my clients grew up in families where they were ostracized or abused for their difference. At some point they then became the one who chooses to become liberated and healed, and even influences others to seek healing.

One couple, who decided to work on their relationship, ended up taking in a sister with her new baby who had separated from her abusive husband. By the couple finding healing in their relationship and offering a safe home to their sister, that whole family is getting the help they need to heal. Chosenness is contagious and that is the beauty of community. Nouwen says, “When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their own chosenness.” P.62

Nouwen gives us three tips on how to “become beloved” and live into our chosenness:

1. “Unmask the world for what it is”. The world tells you lies about who you are. Every time you feel hurt or rejected, you have to say to yourself, “These feelings are not the truth about myself. I am a chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, called beloved for all eternity.”
2. “Look for people and places where your truth is spoken and where you are reminded of your deepest identity as the chosen one”. I hope our community is one of those places.
3. “Say thank you to God for having chosen you. We can decide to be bitter or grateful. When we persist in looking at the shadow side, we will eventually end up in the dark.” P. 61 Nouwen speaks of how the core members of L’Arche choose to be grateful in spite of all the challenges they face. He says, “When we keep claiming the light, we will find ourselves becoming more and more radiant.” P 62

Nouwen describes his relationship with a core member at Daybreak named Helen. At first, she seemed to be in a world of her own and Nouwen says he was afraid of her. But she came out of her isolation and became a great source of joy for the community. He says in order to appreciate the belovedness of others we have to embrace our own belovedness. “As long as my self-doubts and fears guided me, I couldn’t create the space for Helen to reveal to me her beauty”. P. 64

As we begin to embrace our own chosenness, we need to reach out especially to those on the margins – those with physical and mental disabilities, those who are gay, lesbian and transgender, those who are left without homes, those who are victims of abuse and violence. We will notice and reflect to others their innate beauty and worthiness.

Chosenness has to be mutual. Recently I saw myself in the light of one of my clients’ experience. She grew up in a village in India, left her home at an early age, and suffered much as she struggled to find her way in the world.

When I was growing up, I thought I would choose the Bruderhof as my place of belonging. I felt chosen by God in a certain sense and thought that meant I was called to this community my parents chose and I grew up in. There was some pressure to choose the Bruderhof as the place one belonged, because the outside world was seen as scary and mostly evil. However, I kept making “bad choices” (a phrase my client used about herself) and “mistakes” and the Bruderhof did not seem to choose me. I kept getting a message that I didn’t belong. Even when I left and took a job outside the community, I thought I would one day be good enough to go back.

However, God chose me when I went searching for books on community in the local library in Albany. There I discovered Betty O’Connor’s book *Call to Commitment* which eventually led to my choosing the Church of the Saviour as my community. When I went to that first retreat on community led by Betty O’Connor, I finally felt chosen and beloved by God and embraced by a small new community of open and loving people. I felt I could freely choose this community being authentically who I am.

A few years later, I was sent a letter from the leader of the Bruderhof community I grew up in. The letter said I should return to them. I went on retreat to discern whether God was calling me back to the Bruderhof. I heard a resounding “NO” on that retreat! I reaffirmed my chosenness to God and this Church of the Saviour community.

So, when a new seeker comes to us to find a place where they might be chosen and which they might choose as their place of belonging, we seek them out – as Betty O’Connor did me when I wrote asking about whether the wind of the spirit is still blowing in your community. We choose the seeker, so they might feel free to choose us. Maybe they will find God and belovedness in our community. People who long to be blessed, who long to share their brokenness and discover their gifts.

Nouwen says, “Deep friendship is a calling forth of each other’s chosenness, and a mutual affirmation of being precious in God’s eyes. Your life and my life are each of them, one of a kind…. Our lives are unique stones in the mosaic of human existence – priceless and irreplaceable.” p 65

(Quote from Black Liturgies, Cole Arthur Riley, on “Dignity” Benediction p 12)

Let us, whom God has chosen, who have chosen this Eighth Day Faith Community, help each other feel that sense of belovedness of God and belonging to one another with our brokenness and our giftedness. Let us reach out to the newcomer and embrace her or him as also chosen, blessed, broken and given to us, and to the world. Let us share the richness and blessing of community with one another and as we go out into the world, let us choose others, and give them our blessing, seeing every person as priceless and irreplaceable.

Amen.