



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
December 13, 2015

"I Chose You" (The Friendship Sermon Series)
The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

At a time when we think everyone should be happy, Christmas could be a sad, depressing time, a time of remorse or regret for many of us. But be of good cheer! I have an encouraging word!

We continue our sermon series today on friendship with God and with others. We will center on just one verse. Jesus said in verse 16: *"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."* (John 15:16)

It is a horrible feeling to NOT be chosen. When we were young it was horrible to be chosen last for a team or for a dance. Have you ever thought that all the cool or smart kids were somewhere having fun, all except you? The horrible feeling of not being chosen first continues into adulthood. We could be asked last to go to a party or not asked at all. Or it can come in more indirect ways.

Recently I was on an international plane flight that would take more than ten hours, and I was sitting in what I call is Purgatory – that in-between place between heaven and hell. In an airplane, it's the section that is the very front row of the economy section, for there just beyond the veil, the curtain that separates the blessed and the not so blessed, lies but some four feet away - the holy of holies (aka first class).

And so recently I was sitting in that front row of economy plus (grateful for that extra leg room), but there, just at the row just in front of me was my friend Jim Price, the great singer who has often sung in our worship services including Christmas Eve. There he was standing there, with a great big grin on his face, as he was about to sit down in the holy of holies, first class.

The veil was pulled back for all to see, and just before he sat down, salt was poured into my wound of jealousy and covetousness as a cute and perky Hawaiian Airlines flight attendant came up to him and asked, "Mr. Price, before we take off, would you like a serving of dim sum?" Hot steaming, delicious, dim sum!? You gotta be kidding.

And the hideous Vincent Price, I mean Jim Price, said gleefully, "Why yes," as he sheepishly looked at me.

The flight attendant then asked him if he would then like a beverage, orange juice perhaps, or maybe some champagne. Champagne? Me in purgatory was not offered a Coke, a Sprite, salted nuts, and not even water.

And with a big smile, Jim said, "Why yes, champagne would be nice." He then turned to me and said, "Hey, Dan, I'll try to sneak you some food. Maybe I can get you an almond cookie"

A mere almond cookie? Even the

crumbs fall to the dogs below the dining table. I will never grovel for an almond cookie!

I asked Jim, "How did you get first class?" He said, "Your neighbor allowed me to use her pass."

My neighbor? My neighbor?! Did my neighbor ever offer me a pass? Nooooo, even though we have lived near each other for decades! But Jim, the pearl of great price, gets chosen by my neighbor to sit on a 10-hour flight in first class, while I, the unchosen one, am in purgatory without water, or nuts, and certainly without a steaming dish of dim sum!

Good thing Jim is not here at worship today or my neighbor. (Oh hi, Jim! You're here!) There was no Chun fun on that flight! And certainly no *chow fun*. It's difficult and a bummer not to be chosen.

Ah, but the good news is that Jesus says in our verse today that HE HAS CHOSEN US! Yes, He has chosen us for an eternal friendship with Him on earth and in heaven. Who needs Jim, when we can have Jesus who offers us the TRUE PEARL of GREAT PRICE?

A theme that runs throughout the New Testament in Scripture is that God has chosen us just as a Father has carefully, intimately, chosen a child in adoption. We have been selected out of the orphanage of life to be given full rights as a son or daughter of a King. Amazing! We get adopted into a royal family!

Maybe in heaven there will be lots and lots of Chinese food, or as my family simply calls it “food” (while most of you call it Chinese food).

It means that even if we have not had a loving mother or father, or a parent that is no longer living, God is our perfect Parent. He will guide us and protect us as a perfect, wonderful, kind, heavenly Father, who also chooses us to be His friends.

Look these verses that show this continual theme throughout the Bible of God choosing us, adopting us, and giving us full rights as children of the King of Kings.

Eph. 1:5 God decided in advance to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. This is what He wanted to do, and it gave Him great pleasure.

Eph. 1:11 Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for He chose us in advance, and He makes everything work out according to His plan.

1Th. 1:4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that He has chosen you,

The amazing news is that Jesus chose us. Jesus Himself chooses us to be with Him. But it’s not to keep all of that love to ourselves. He chose us to share His love with others and bring them to Him. That is what He calls fruit. And because He has chosen us we can have the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

The crazy thing is that as Jesus has chosen us, the verse we are studying today also says that as adopted children of God, we can ask whatever we want and we can get it! How can that be?

Let’s look at the verse again:

John 15:16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask Him in my name.

Ah, but did you see that the catch is that we have to ask in His name, which means that we have to ask in His will. So is it a stacked deck? In a sense, yes. If we ask for what He wanted to give us anyway, in His will, then we will get what we ask. Hey, no fair, we might say. That is like saying we may get a new camera not because I asked God but because God wanted me to have it in the first place and allowed me to get it. Or maybe I don’t want a camera, you say. Maybe I want fame and glory and money instead.

But here’s the spiritual truth: the closer we get to Jesus, we will find that what WE want becomes what HE wants, so we never feel like we are falling short. We start getting on the same wavelength as God. We are Spirit-led rather than ego-led. Therefore, we don’t ask for 10 Rolls Royces or 22 Teslas (though I would like one) because in the Spirit we know that is foolish. We don’t ask for fame for ourselves. Because we then know that a life pursuing fame ends in trouble.

Do we ask for healing? Yes? God would not want us to suffer. Yes? But we all suffer. His will is that even in the midst of pain and suffering we remain faithful, vigilant, and patient. He will not always remove our pain but He will give us strength in the midst of pain. He makes our shoulders stronger to bear the pain. He never promised that He would remove pain for He Himself had to go through pain for that was the will of His Father.

But Jesus received tremendous inner strength to handle the pain long enough to fulfill the will of God.

Ultimately Jesus died on a cross so that all of our sin and wrongdoing would be forgiven and removed from us.

This Christmas, may we know that Jesus came to this earth and that He has chosen us. You may think that is like soccer player David Beckham or *Game of Thrones* star Emilia Clarke showing up at your prom and choosing you for the first dance.

But yet let us not get too prideful in thinking that we are more special and better than anyone else, and that is why God chose us. Uhm, actually the real reason is just the opposite. He chose a lot of us because in the world we are losers!

And you say what? First you tell us that we are chosen, and that we are special, and that it’s like David Beckham or Emilia Clarke choosing us at the dance. But now that we are happily zooming down in the roller coaster because of being chosen by God, you tell us that we are actually losers with a big “L” on our foreheads.

Yes, that’s what I’m saying. But hear me clearly. We are Losers because we don’t think like the world. We don’t dress like it. Our aim is not to dress like Vogue on the outside while we are vague on the inside. We are not to be vague; we are laser focused on Christ. Hence, we are losers because we don’t think like the world; we aren’t in power like the world. Nor were we born on the right side of the tracks. Hey, this isn’t my great idea. It’s what the Bible says.

Here is what the Bible says why we were chosen by God. Are you ready for this? It’s not because you have high SAT scores or you are really cool or wealthy or come from royal blood. In a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to an early church in the city of Corinth, this is why the Almighty God chose us:

1 *Cor. 1:26 Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you.*

1Cor. 1:27 Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And He chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.

1Cor. 1:28 God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.

1Cor. 1:29 As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

1Cor. 1:30 God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; He made us pure and holy, and He freed us from sin.

1Cor. 1:31 Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD."

Just when I want to boast, God says I shouldn't! We might think, "No way. Is that true? No way! I'm not chosen because I am a loser." But it is true if being a loser means you come from a position of no power.

We see examples in the Bible of how God chooses those of low position. God chose a common carpenter named Joseph and a simple peasant girl named Mary to be the human parents of Jesus. God chose a woman also named Mary, from a city called Magdala, to be the first person in history to announce that Jesus had risen from the dead. (Mary of Magdala had five demonic spirits in her until Jesus healed her, which made Mary decide to follow Him.) Jesus did not choose the powerful governor or the mayor, the head of

the chamber of commerce or someone with a great title. He chose an outcast woman to be the first preacher of the good news. He takes the simple and chooses them for things great.

And don't miss this point: Jesus takes the sinners and chooses them and, to be more clear, chooses US sinners to be with Him.

In a recent homily [Dec. 9 2015], Pope Francis said that God chose His people out of love. He said that God chose them "not because they were big and powerful but because they were the smallest and most wretched of all."

Some here today may say, "But Dan, I don't think God would choose me. I mean there are wretches and there are the REALLY wretched, and I am in the latter group. I have wandered so far from the Lord's will, there is no hope for me. I have done things that are so bad, that I can't even forgive myself."

Pope Francis would say, "God's love is like that of mothers and fathers when they speak to their child after he or she has awoken after a nightmare."

And so just as our parents once reassured us after traumatic experiences by saying, "It's okay, don't be scared, I'm here," God says, "Do not be afraid of your sins, I love you; I am here to forgive you."

This is the mercy of God. He chooses to forgive us and extend mercy.

In that same homily, Pope Francis referred to the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Pope Francis said that "we are all so nervous when something does not go as planned; we scream and shout; we are impatient...."

But God is saying, "Calm down; yes

you've made a mistake but don't worry, don't be afraid. I forgive you." (Dec. 10, 2015, Pope Francis: God Is Merciful and steadfast in His love, Vatican Radio, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-god-is-merciful-and-steadfast-in-his>)

I have one final thing to say. Know in the deepest part of your heart that you are chosen by God in spite of your imperfections. I pray that you remember this during the good and bad times.

I appreciate what Ron and Angela shared this morning. In God's timing, I personally needed to hear those words. Just last week I lost a friend in a way similar Ron and Angela lost their son. It was shocking and sad.

For those who go through depression, know in the deepest part of your soul that imperfection is in us all. We are all far from perfect. Sometimes we feel depressed because we feel helpless to change, or that we are not accomplishing enough, or what we can do often ends in what we think is failure.

And when depressed, we can emphasize the negatives – I'm not pretty enough, smart enough, successful enough, etc. When we feel we don't fit and we feel we are failures, that is the time to know that God has chosen us. He has chosen us because we don't fit with the rest of a world that might think they are competent and cool, but really they are not as competent and cool as they think they are. God has chosen us for a pure reason of love. Not for any other reason. And we can bathe in that love if we just accept it.

And when we feel powerless, know that brings our Lord closer to us, and someday that will be part of our testimony about God.

Even if we have known Jesus for years, we need to hear that God loves us in spite of our imperfection.

Just because we are Christians, or even Christians for a long, long, time, it does not mean we have it all together. And we shouldn't be afraid to share with others that we don't have it all together. One of the values we strive to have in our church is authenticity. It's okay to say we don't have it together or that we feel depressed or feel at times our prayers are hitting the ceiling above us. God has chosen us, and may that fact be a stabilizing force in us.

And remember, sometimes when we are depressed, it means we are just shedding false gods or false worldly assumptions about life that we need to get rid of.

One step further. When we know we are chosen, then there should also be a challenge for us all to go out and build bridges with others so that they may know this Jesus who loves them, forgives them all and chooses them with all of their imperfections.

If I may borrow the thoughts of Pope Francis again from a different homily, he said that the Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, but also to the **existential peripheries**. What is that? I have never heard that phrase. That's a \$25 phrase!

He said there are the peripheries, or to say it more commonly, the outer areas or margins of life. It's in those outer areas that may be emotional or geographical regions where there are the mysteries of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and of religious indifference of thought, of all misery.

He said, "Christians who are afraid to build bridges and prefer to build walls are Christians who are not sure of their faith... when the church loses this apostolic courage, she becomes a stalled church, a tidy Church, a Church that is nice to look at, but is without fertility, because she's lost the

courage to go to the outskirts."

Pope Francis said, "I remember when as a child one would hear in Catholic families, in my family, 'No, we cannot go to their house, because they are not married in the Church.' It was as an exclusion. No, you could not go! Neither could we go to [the houses of] socialists or atheists. Now, thank God, people do not say such things, right? [Such an attitude] was a defense of the faith, but it was one of walls: the Lord makes bridges." [<http://spirituality.ucanews.com/2013/07/01/the-existential-peripheries/>]

Pope Francis and I want a church that is not always safe and sanitized but one that doesn't mind at times being damaged by risks in reaching out to those in the margins who feel lost. It is true, we need to build bridges not walls with all people so that they might hear the good news.

There are many spiritual and international refugees who need to experience God's love. They must be welcomed. The way of the Cross is not always safe, as Tim Shaw once said. If we have been chosen by God to experience His amazing mercy, how can we not share that with others? Don't keep this wonderful supernatural reality from others.

When we have been chosen by Jesus to the dance, our confidence builds, our compassion builds and then we ask others to go out on the dance floor with us. The question before us now that we know that Jesus has chosen us, will we even go out on the dance floor with Him? Or will we just sit on the sidelines staying near the comfort of the punchbowl of life and miss out on an adventure of being with God on the dance floor. Jesus said:

Matt. 11:16 "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

Matt. 11:17 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance;

What does it mean to dance with Jesus? It means to trust Him to hold you. It means to trust Him to lead you....in all areas of your life – financial, health, job, social life, and family. It means to truly dedicate and commit your life to Him. It means to allow Him to be close to you and you choose to have an intimate relationship with Him.

Today, can be the best Christmas season of all, if we accept that Jesus has chosen us, He has forgiven us, He does have a great plan for us. And if we follow His lead, then let us dance with Him.

Amen? Amen! Let us pray! Lord, Our hope is that the You who have chosen us, You have come to earth fully human and fully God. And this is the Christmas we celebrate. This is the Nativity scene we remember, and as we celebrate this we think of the night you were born and our opportunity to give gifts in your name. Amen.