

Pentecost 8 (Proper 10), July 15, 2018
Sermon: chosen means you're special.
Text: Ephesians 1:3–14

Amos 7:7–15

This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass by them; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said, “‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. ¹⁵ But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’

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 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed 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 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and

believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Mark 6:14–29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." ¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

As I drove by the middle school with the empty playground, I began to think of my days on the school playground. Go back with me, if you will, to your days on the school playground. You're

there, with the other kids, just playing around, when someone suggests a game. Quickly, the two biggest, most athletic boys proclaim themselves captains, and they begin to choose one-by-one who will be on their team.

The fastest runners, the best at sports, etc. are chosen quickly.

Then the captains begin the painful process of trying to sort through the leftovers (me included). No one wants the kid with the glasses because he misses every other ball that comes his way. Or the bow-legged girl because she can't run very fast. Or the scrawny kid because he's half the size of the others. And so, they are either not chosen or just as bad, relegated to a position where they won't be involved in the game. Basically, they're left out.

Whether it's softball on the playground, or getting a part in the school play, or being selected for a promotion at work, each of us wants to be chosen. Picked for the team. In this world, being chosen says something about who we are. It gives us a sense of identity. Of belonging. Yes, in many ways, being chosen means you're special.

But . . . if we're left out, it implies that, for some reason, we don't quite measure up, that we aren't good enough. In our society, where a person's value is based on worldly standards, it's easy to feel as if you don't belong. If you don't wear the right clothes, drive the right car, or aren't beautiful or smart, then in many ways you don't measure up. You aren't good enough. And therefore, you don't belong.

And if we apply that same system of determining value and worth to the Church, we quickly see that when it comes to things spiritual, we really don't belong here, either. We say in our Creed that we believe in one Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. But then we look at our lives and see that "saint" isn't the first word that comes to mind in describing ourselves. Each of us has plenty of moments we can recall when we've failed to live as God created us to live. We look at His Word, His Law, and we can easily see how often we've broken His commandments. We may have a particular sin—or even many sins—we're so ashamed of that we've never admitted them to anyone. I've got those kinds of sins. And I think you do, too. And our sins, like flaws in our

personality or defects in our bodies, show us that we don't even belong in the Church. That we aren't "good enough" to be in God's presence, let alone be chosen by him.

But then we read the words of St. Paul in our text from Ephesians.

I'd like to highlight portions of the first paragraph and have you focus on who, exactly, is the subject in these verses. Pick out who's doing the action in each sentence, and I'll try to help:

He has "**blessed us**" (v 3), He "**chose us**" (v 4), He "**predestined us**" (v 5), (again) He has "**blessed us**" (v 6), He "**lavished upon us**" (v 8), and He "**set forth**" (v 9). Notice that in each of these verses, it is God who is doing the action. He is doing the choosing. He is deciding who belongs to Him. And on what basis is He doing the choosing? It isn't based on our actions or on how well we meet His expectations, because all of us sin and fall short of His glory. Instead, God chooses us, Paul says, to be "**holy and blameless**" in his sight. "**In love,**" v 5, "**he predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons (and daughters) through Jesus Christ.**" "**In him we have redemption through his blood, the**

forgiveness of our trespasses” (v 7).

Why are we chosen? God chooses us for one reason and one reason only. Hard as it may be to believe, it isn't my looks or my smarts or my good deeds that led Him to choose me. Instead, He chose me—as he chooses each of us—based not on our merits, but on the merits of Christ, which are freely given to us. Freely credited to us. By faith, we are made His.

In Jesus, through our faith in His life, His death, and His resurrection, God loves us and chooses us. Therefore, we belong. He's the captain, and He has made us a part of His team, part of His family. And if you look in the Bible, you'll see story after story where God chooses someone to be His, not because they are so worthy, but simply because He loves them.

Look at David, a scrawny shepherd boy, who later in life would have a man killed in order to steal that man's wife. Still, God chooses him as king, and as forerunner to Christ. Or look at Paul himself. Persecutor of the early believers, hands covered with the blood of the first Christians. Still, God chooses him to be an apostle to the world. Did God choose these men because they

were so good? No, He chose them because He loved them and wanted them to be His.

And remember when Jesus sends out His disciples. Jesus sends them out into the world armed only with His authority. And as the disciples go out, they do great things. Not because they are great people, but because they belong to Him. As Luke records this event, he tells us that when the disciples returned they were really excited about all the things they had done: demons were cast out, the sick were healed. But Jesus tells them that they shouldn't be so excited about the great things that they could do. They should rejoice instead that their names are written in the book of life. Rejoice, he says, because you belong.

It's not required, but I invite you to close your eyes just for a moment so that you can visualize a scene from the past. The distant past. A time, in fact, before time even was. In the vast emptiness before creation, God alone existed. And before He ever said, "Let there be light," He chose you. Paul says, **"he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be**

holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” Before you were, before anything was, God chose you. That makes you special, special to him. He wrote your name in the book of life, for He wants you to be with Him forever. What a source of joy! What a source of comfort! To know that we are His, both now and forever, solely because of our faith in Jesus. You’re that special to Him!

Do any of you remember the Disney movie Toy Story? It centers on a group of toys that belong to a young boy named Andy. And of all his toys, Andy’s favorite is a cowboy named Woody. How do we know this? Because Andy has written his own name on the bottom of Woody’s foot. It was a mark of ownership, yes. But we also see that it is a sign of Andy’s love, too. His love for Woody. Later in the movie, the new toy, Buzz Lightyear, is also marked on his foot by Andy, showing that he, too, is loved. That he, too, belongs.

In the same way, we have been marked by God in our Baptism,

having been claimed by him as His own possession. But as more than just a possession, for God's mark also clearly shows His love for us in Jesus. Yes, at our Baptism, as we were marked with the sign of the cross on our forehead and over our heart, and then as water was applied with the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it shows us that we belong to God. As St. Paul writes, **"You . . . were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance."**

Some of you may have noticed that at certain times in the worship service—during the Invocation, the Creed, or while receiving Communion—I and other worshipers follow the ancient custom of making the sign of the cross. As I have often explained, the sign of the cross is a reminder of our Baptism. For as one remembers his or her Baptism, they are reminded that they've been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and therefore they belong to God.

Today, as you come to the Lord's Supper, I want you to notice that each of the Communion wafers is marked as well. Marked with

the sign of the cross. Take a moment to notice it. To consider that mark. Let it remind you that through the sacrifice of Jesus, you also are marked, and you also belong. You're that special to him! Again if you would like, but one last time I invite you to close your eyes just for a moment so that you can visualize a scene. This one's in the future. You're on your deathbed, and you know it's almost time for this life to come to an end. And as you lay there, you think back on where you've been and what you've done. But mostly you think about where you're going. And a smile comes to your face because you know. There's no "I hope I was good enough," but only "I know that I will be with Jesus because He died for me and He chose me to be His forever."

Are we good enough to be chosen? No. But because of Jesus, who gives us His perfection, the result is yes. Let us therefore praise **"the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"** (v 3). Why? Because we belong . . . to Him! Amen.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

