

Sermon for January 29, 2017 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 1:26-33 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: **Consider your call to faith.**

- 1) *God didn't choose you for your ability.*
- 2) *He chose you for his glory.*

*<sup>26</sup>For example, consider your call, brothers. Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were powerful, and not many were born with high status. <sup>27</sup>But God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong, <sup>28</sup>and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one may boast before God. <sup>30</sup>But because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. <sup>31</sup>God did this so that, just as it is written, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."*

What do you think is more important for a team's success: having a superstar player or a good coach?

I recently heard a commentary about the Patriots' journey to the Super Bowl. The commentator said that it had less to do with their star players than with Bill Belichick's coaching ability. He pointed to how well the Patriots played during Tom Brady's suspension, and asked if the Packers would have played that well without Aaron Rodgers. He didn't think so.

I believe that there is a lot of truth to what this commentator said. Consider how well the Badgers did under Bo Ryan. He didn't single out "superstar" players for recruitment, but only those, who were willing to work hard for the team – even if other colleges rejected them.

Yes, when it comes to a team's success, a great coach makes all the difference in the world. This is why I can't stand hot shot athletes, who brag as if they are God's gift to the world. Their pride often causes so much jealousy and rivalry that, even if they are great players, the whole team suffers.

Overly proud teammates: could such a thing happen in the Christian Church? Sadly it happens all the time. Worse yet, every single one of us is guilty of it! "How can that be," someone might ask, "I have never bragged about my Christianity." Well, maybe not verbally; but your heart tells a different story, doesn't it?

Have you ever thought, "Why does pastor keep pushing things like Bible class and sending my kids to St. Paul's or MLHS? I've been a life long member of Immanuel and learned all this stuff as a kid. I know it well enough to teach my children." Or how about: "Why are the elders talking to me about my lack of Church attendance? Why don't they talk to so and so over there, whose sin is much worse than mine?" Have you ever looked at other Christians and thought, "If the pastor only knew what *they* did this week. . ."

Do you know what all those thoughts have in common? The person thinking them assumes that they are “better” than their teammate; that they don’t need to come to practice (Bible Class) or listen to their coach’s (the LORD’s) instruction. And what does the Christian look like who thinks these thoughts? He looks like me. He looks like you. Without even realizing it, we all have been the guy so full of himself in his heart that he hurts his team.

This is why we would do well to pay attention to our sermon text. Why? Because it reminds us that everything we have and are as Christians comes not from ourselves, but from the LORD. He has graciously chosen us for his team. He blessed us with every gift necessary to live and work to his glory. Let us consider these things under the theme: **Consider your call to faith.** 1) *God didn't choose you for your ability.* 2) *He chose you for his glory.*

Part One: God didn't choose you for your ability.

Our sermon text is part of a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a congregation he founded in Corinth – a godless, immoral city situated in Greece. While in Ephesus, Paul received a report that this congregation was facing a lot of different problems – one of which was members bragging about things like: who baptized them, which called worker they followed, their knowledge, etc., etc.

Paul knew this pride was detrimental to the unity the congregation shared in Christ. This is why Paul reminds the Corinthians that the called worker they followed and who baptized them is of no consequence. All that matters is Christ, and the unity they shared in him.

God doesn’t want Christians to be like the world - bragging about their own wisdom and accomplishments. He wants us to glory in Christ and the Gospel of his cross – a message that the world considers utter foolishness, but that is, in fact, the power of God for the salvation of all who believe it. Right before our text, Paul writes: *the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.*<sup>1</sup>

The congregation of Corinth was living proof of God's wise “foolishness” and powerful “weakness”. Paul writes:

<sup>26</sup>*For example, consider your call, brothers. Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were powerful, and not many were born with high status.*

The congregation of Corinth was not an elite team of highly trained theologians, philosophers, politicians and rhetoricians, who could easily sway the masses of Corinth to the Gospel of Christ.

No, quite the opposite was true. They were a diverse group of people from every rung of society: rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, synagogue ruler, prostitute, and everything in between. The people that composed this congregation came with all sorts of baggage and struggled with all kinds of sin – some of which even the greater population of Corinth considered shameful (and that’s saying something, if you know anything about that ancient city!) These are the people God chose to represent him and his grace in the city of Corinth.

“How utterly foolish,” we might be tempted to think, “The diversity and baggage people brought to the congregation seems like a recipe for disaster. I mean if I were God and wanted to spread the message of salvation on this earth, I would pick the movers and shakers – people of influence, who have their act together.”

But God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.<sup>ii</sup> God chose the people he chose for a reason. And what reason was that? Our text tells us:

*God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong,<sup>28</sup> and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before God.*

The history of Christianity is fascinating to study. Throughout time, the Christian Church has been composed mainly of uneducated, weak, and lowly people. I know of no other group that has faced as many dangers from without as well as from within as the Christian Church; things like mockery, persecution, false doctrine, power struggles, war . . .

Humanly speaking, it’s absolutely astonishing that the Gospel is still preached today. And yet, here it is. Why? Was it because of all the superstar believers throughout Church history – like the apostle Peter and the reformer Luther? No, because even these men were nothing special in and of themselves. Peter was a fisherman and Luther the son of a commoner. God alone accomplished the spread and success of his Gospel. Without his continuous blessing Christianity would have failed long ago. We have him alone to thank for the faith we have.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we would all do well to soberly reflect on who we truly are: a diverse group of people from varied backgrounds. We come to this congregation with all sorts of baggage and struggles. We are all spiritual beggars in his sight – incapable of doing anything right before him. We are all sinful and in need of His mercy.

Part Two: He chose you for his glory.

And yet God, graciously chose us! Can you believe it? The LORD chose us to be on his team – members of His Church, as the next verse in our text indicates:

*<sup>30</sup>But because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*

It’s only because of God that we are in Christ Jesus. We did not choose him, but he chose us from before the creation of the world. In love, he determined to send his Son to suffer and die for our sins. In love, he determined to send the Holy Spirit to awaken repentance and faith in our hearts so that we might receive the benefits of his Son’s work on our behalf. Our salvation is completely God’s choosing and doing – accomplished for us in Christ.

Yes, everything we have and are is because of Jesus. He is *the wisdom from God* - the fullness of the deity in bodily form.<sup>iii</sup> To know him is to know the LORD. To listen to him is to listen to God. And where do we hear Jesus? We hear him in his Word that is taught and preached here, and in every faithful, Christian church and school.

Jesus is our *righteousness*, who declares us free and forgiven of all sin because of his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection on our behalf. This righteousness is ours through faith in the Gospel. He is our *sanctification*, who purified us from all sins through the water of Holy Baptism by clothing us with himself.<sup>iv</sup> He is our *redemption*, who bought us back from our sins for God by the offering up of his body and shedding of his blood on the cross, which he freely gives to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Everything we have and are is because of the grace God has shown us in Christ, as St. Paul says elsewhere: <sup>8</sup> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—* <sup>9</sup> *not by works, so that no one can boast.* <sup>10</sup> *For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*<sup>v</sup>

Yes, we are God’s workmanship. Without him we are nothing and accomplish nothing. God chose us, not because we are so great, but because we are so weak.

<sup>31</sup> *God did this so that, just as it is written, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: whenever you are tempted to sinfully judge a fellow Christian in your heart, or to view a fellow member’s godly concern and encouragement as harassment that you don’t need because you are “fine” in your faith – remember who you are. We are all sinners who, in and of ourselves, have no wisdom, power or ability to save ourselves. But God has graciously chosen us to be on his team – not that we might brag about our talents and abilities, but to use everything God has graciously given us to the glory of his name.

And how can we glorify God’s name? Luther tells us in his Small Catechism: [God’s name is glorified] *when his Word is taught in its truth and purity, and we as children of God lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!*<sup>vi</sup>

Yes, may the LORD ever help us to this end: that we glorify his saving name by learning and living his Gospel. Such a life starts with a humble reflection of who we are and our need for his mercy and grace. Therefore, dear Christian, take the opportunities God gives you to **Consider your call to faith.** *He didn't choose you for your ability. He chose you for his glory.* Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25 (NIV84)

<sup>ii</sup> cf. Isaiah 55:8-9

<sup>iii</sup> cf. Colossian 2:9

<sup>iv</sup> cf. Galatians 3:26

<sup>v</sup> Ephesians 2:10 (NIV84)

<sup>vi</sup> Explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Petition of the Lord’s Prayer.