

“Chosen” – Stephanie Wing, 1.3.10

I’m sure many of you have heard stories of couples who struggled for years to have children, then finally adopted, and soon after adopting, conceived and gave birth to biological children. I also know of couples who have had their own children biologically and chose later to adopt additional children. I always thought it would be difficult to be the adopted child, to feel like you were less your parents’ child than their own genetic offspring. However, I have heard many accounts to the opposite, that some adopted children felt particularly special because of all the children, they had been *chosen*.

Our passages from John and Ephesians use the language and image of our adoption as God’s children through Jesus Christ. I used to take issue with this language. I thought that being adopted through Christ was just short of actually being children of God. But in our adoption, we receive the same graces, all spiritual blessings, and have the full power to be children of God. Nothing is lacking. We are assured through these words of Scripture that we are God’s children, not by any accident of birth, but that we are adopted, and *chosen* by God. Chosen-ness was central to the identity of the Israelites. Through their ancestor Abraham, God had made a covenant, saying, “You are my people, and I am your God. I choose you.”

Almost a year ago, Andy and I were ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Installed as your Co-Pastors. During that very special service, I

started to become overwhelmed with the thought of having been chosen for this service. It had been quite a journey, with plenty of bumps, twists, and turns along the way. I felt very clearly that I wasn't choosing this call, but that God was calling me into it, choosing me in spite of myself.

How do we know we are chosen? Being the good Presbyterians that we are, we knew because a half-dozen committees told us so! The process leading towards ordination of Minister of Word and Sacrament might start with an internal sense of call, but it must be confirmed in many steps by many individuals and committees – everyone from the church Session to the Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry and Committee on Ministry, to the ordination exam graders and our professors, to the Presbytery to this congregation. Similarly, the Elders that we ordain and install today were chosen by an elected nominating committee and elected by all of you for service in the church.

Election describes the democratic process by which we choose our leaders, but it is also a theological term that is central to our Reformed Theology. John Calvin believed that God has already chosen and elected us for salvation. This kind of election has nothing to do with winning votes. It has nothing to do with earning the approval or confidence of God. Our election as God's chosen people really doesn't depend on us at all, but depends entirely on God's choosing us. We are adopted and chosen as children of God simply by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It feels good to be chosen, doesn't it? Well, sometimes... You see, we understand that as God's chosen people, we are not chosen just for salvation, but also for service. I had more than one person tell me as I was exploring ministry, "If you can do anything else and be happy, do it." Ministry is not easy – not as a Minister, an Elder, or as any follower of Christ. It requires sacrifice and guarantees travel on some rocky roads. Being chosen is often a mixed bag of blessings and sobering realities. Just after President Obama was elected last November, there was a noticeable change in his demeanor. Even in his acceptance speech, his tone was more measured and serious. It was a victory celebration tempered by the sober reality of the monumental challenges that lay ahead.

Do you remember the story of Jonah in the Old Testament? God chose Jonah to deliver a message to the Ninevites. Jonah did not want to go, and he hopped onto the first ship traveling in the opposite direction. And then there was the story of Moses. He sensed from a young age that he was called to deliver the Israelites from bondage, but after a rough start, he had settled into his life working with his father-in-law. When God spoke to Moses and told him to tell Pharaoh to let the people go, Moses said, "I think you have the wrong person. You see, I get all tongue-tied, and I'm just no good with words." In the New Testament, when Jesus calls some of his first disciples, they are fishing without success. He tells them to cast the net on the other side, and soon the boat is nearly capsized by the bounty from the sea. But rather than thanking God for this success, they ask Jesus

to leave them – they aren't sure if they can handle such abundant blessing! Being chosen by God for salvation is one thing, but the call to service is quite another.

But we are assured that just as God chooses us, God also blesses us in Christ with every spiritual blessing. God calls us to service and also gives us the grace that we need to serve. If we look to our own strength, we have plenty of reasons to panic. There are always reasons why we can't serve God in the way that God is calling us to serve. We don't have the time, the strength, the energy, or the resources. Perhaps we feel that we aren't prepared, we don't know enough, or we aren't worthy enough for the work. And often we are right about that.

But God, who can accomplish all things, can use even us to accomplish great things for God's kingdom. As the writer of Ephesians notes, God has made known to us through Christ God's plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in heaven and on earth. God's desire for heaven and earth is reconciliation and wholeness. We are so far from that reality right now, but in Christ we have been chosen to inherit that Kingdom, and to participate here and now in that work of reconciliation. A sign of that promised inheritance is the Holy Spirit, at work in us and through us today. The Spirit strengthens us for the work of the kingdom.

Each of us has a part to play in that work. Each of us is adopted. Each of us is chosen. Today we celebrate the gifts that God gives to each of us, and the call of particular individuals to service as Elders in the church. You might not be called forward today for ordination or installation, but you are called. You are called to

support and encourage those who are ordained for service in the church. And you are called to work alongside these leaders. Andy and I are not the heads of this church. The Session is not the head of this church. Christ is the head of this church, and all of us, as members of the body of Christ, are called and gifted for service. Each of us has a part to play.

The work of ministry is not limited to what Andy and I can do, nor is it all assigned to those actively serving on the Session. There is much work to be done. We have a responsibility to teach and nurture our children, youth, and adults through Christian Education. We are charged with meeting the spiritual and physical needs of our community and beyond. We are called to work for justice and peace, to speak for those who have little or no voice. We are all commanded to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a world that desperately needs true hope. We are called. We are chosen. How will we respond? Let us go forward today and into the new year, called by God, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and adopted as children through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.