

Easter 6B 2018, May 6, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

Right here, in these words of Jesus heard today in our gospel reading, rings the very heart of Good News. This is pure grace. Grace is the gift brought to you by a friend; totally unexpected, overwhelming and heart-warming. The sudden and serendipitous encounter with a stunningly beautiful sunrise or sunset leaving you breathless and in awe of its sheer majesty. The first time a child smiles at you because she recognizes your voice and it gladdens her heart. Gifts which leave us humble and joyful and thankful to be alive. “I chose you,” Jesus says.

Choosing us, even knowing who we are. When we grow angry with those closest to us, our immediate family or friends, because they disappoint us, their failures and shortcomings looming large in our lives, unable to see the same qualities in ourselves that we so quickly ascribe to others. “I chose you,” Jesus says. In spite of. Because of.

Jesus chose us because he loves us. Lavishly, abundantly. Like a host who invites you to dinner and when you arrive you realize you are the guest of honor. Or like a father who waits patiently for his wayward son to return and when he does throws the best party seen in these parts in quite a while. That’s how much Jesus loves us.

But there’s more. Jesus speaks these words to his closest friends, to those who trust him and follow him and listen to him teach and who have sat there as he knelt in front of them and washed their feet in a basin of water and dried them with a towel. He will soon lay down his own life on the cross out of love for the whole world. That’s what true love does. Love with a passion and a heart and depth that is both gentle and strong, fearless and freeing.

Such self-giving love often stands in sharp contrast with our modern world. Let me illustrate: You want to buy a new TV set, so you head over to the big box store, or more frequently today online, where you can pick and choose from dozens of different makes and models. You take it home or it arrives by UPS and you hook up your cable box or internet streaming where you have the choice of hundreds of different channels. The success of today’s modern world centers on having choices and lots of them. You go into a supermarket and you don’t want to see just one or two brands of crackers or ketchup or cleansers. You want five, six, maybe a dozen.

Americans love choice, because Americans love autonomy. ‘Love’ is not too strong a word used here. When pressed, I would say “choice” ranks high, if not the highest, of our values. The ability to choose what we want when we want it drives our economy, drives our politics, drives every arena of our lives. We want to choose our own doctors, choose our own life-partners, choose our own careers, choose who we associate with and what groups we join.

A true self-giving love stands in sharp contrast to this other kind of love that places your self at the center. True love reaches in and creates a relationship which honors and respects and nurtures the freedom of the other. We believe we’ve made the choice to love, but in reality we’ve already been loved so much by God. Our love of God in return isn’t really a choice, but a response deep from the heart. Like that sunset you see and can’t help but stand in awe, or that totally unexpected gift from a friend. Our choice to love Jesus comes from the freedom we’ve already been given as a gift of his love. Because his love respects and honors our humanity and dignifies us.

Love born in freedom and because of freedom is not a chore, it does not weigh us down with heavy obligation. “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments,” John says in the reading we heard this morning, “and his commandments are not burdensome.” Jesus commands us to love one another, but this is not burdensome. Rather, it’s a command born in freedom. For by first loving us we are given our human dignity and respect by God. We are lifted from the status of servant and slave, serving a God before whom we might have trembled and cowered, and elevated to the status of friend. “I do not call you servants any longer,” Jesus says, “but I have called you friends.”

To love someone who loves you is not a burden nor is it a chore. When we are loved, whether as a spouse or as a child or as a friend, we find ourselves living in a freedom that otherwise did not exist. When someone asks me how they will know if they are in love enough to get married I often tell them this, “When the thought of committing your life to another person feels like freedom and not a burden then you are ready.” This is just as true for Jesus as it is for us. When I first realized this I had to stop and just be amazed. Jesus himself finds his own freedom in being loved by the Father and this freedom opens him to love us. And the freedom we find in being loved by Jesus is the freedom we find in loving one another. Our love for one another comes directly from Jesus’ love for us, which comes from the Father’s love for Jesus. There exists a holy pipeline of love flowing from the Father, to the Son, to us for the sake of the world.

I remember seeing one of those church signs which said, “God loves you whether you like it or not.” I understood the sentiment, and I think it was trying to

say, in an awkward sort of way, that God loves us no matter what our response may be. We may love God in return, but that doesn't make God's love for us any deeper or more profound. We may ignore God's love, or take it for granted, or even reject it outright, but God will still love us and welcome us into our true home, like that father welcoming his returning son. But the saying has a kind of aggressive tone to it, and that's not in keeping with the kind of love that respects and nurtures our human freedom and dignity. Genuine love is concerned with how the recipient receives love.

Just as Jesus is concerned with how we receive his love for us. He wants love to flourish and grow in our lives and among each other. He already loves us with a depth so great that he willingly laid down his life on our behalf. In his rising from the grave love is revealed as the goal and fulfillment for everyone in the world. The Father loves the Son also with a passion and depth that he raised him from the dead. The Son lives and that means love will triumph for the whole world. All anger, all warfare, all the selfish choices we make, all the ways humans show hatred will dissolve away as the Son's life of love fills every human heart and life. We his followers are those who both model his love and begin to fill the world with his love.

This morning one of our young people will affirm the promises God made to him in baptism. Tommy will confirm the choice God first made in baptism; to love Tommy and call you his own forever. What Tommy will do today is in reality nothing more than what each of us does every day as we live out our faith; that is, affirming God's prior and first choice of us. Living out our faith in the one who first loves us is true freedom from which we bear the fruit of love.

The fruit we are appointed to bear is the fruit of love. For love that is rooted deeply in Jesus is a love that will last and spread and grow so that one day, all people will find themselves living in the true freedom to love one another. Amen.