***GOD CHOOSES!***

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Texts: Acts 10:34-48 and Matthew 3:13-17

One of the privileges of being pastor to so many kids is that they so readily share with me their brilliant knock-knock jokes.

Knock, knock! [Who’s there?]

Interrupting duck. [Interrupting duck] – QUACK – [who?]

Now that was not exactly Peter’s experience in Cornelius’ home, but it wasn’t far off. Peter had been invited to Cornelius’ home to speak to a gathering of Cornelius’ family and friends. Cornelius was a Roman centurion and a God-fearing man who prayed to the Lord and gave alms to the poor. But he was still an uncircumcised Gentile, an agent of Rome who was unclean in the eyes of Jews and Jewish Christians. Cornelius invited Peter to his home because he had a vision in which an angel told him to bring Peter there. While two servants and one of Cornelius’ soldiers were on their way to summon Peter, Peter had a vision of his own – three times he saw a large sheet descend from heaven with all kinds of animals on it, and he heard a divine voice tell him to kill and eat; when Peter objected that the animals were unclean, the voice told him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter was pondering what that vision meant when the soldier arrived and asked him to come to Cornelius’ home.

Peter could have stayed there and pondered away about the meaning of his vision, but sometimes you have to get away from home and beyond yourself to understand what God has in mind. Sitting around and waiting for some divine revelation or answer to a question that will shed light on your life may be less helpful than getting up out of your recliner and going out to do God’s work. For, it may be there – among the folks at Valley Mission or among the shelves in the Verona Food Pantry or among the kids at the Boys and Girls Club or on the porch rocking with the friend you’ve been meaning to visit or while hammering a nail on a Habitat project that God speaks the word you’ve been waiting to hear.

So it was for Peter. Instead of staying at home and pondering the vision, he went with the soldier and some of the circumcised believers from Joppa to the home of the centurion Cornelius. It was not until he arrived at the house and heard Cornelius describe his vision that Peter fully understood his own. What he understood was this:

*God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.*

Peter understood that the Lord was the God of all people, and what or who God made clean should not be called unclean. Gentiles who were unclean under Jewish law might be made clean by God. The God who had given to Peter his vision of the sheet descending from heaven was also the God who had granted the vision to Cornelius. The visions of the Jewish Christian and the Gentile God-fearer were tied by a common thread which belonged to God. So Peter began to tell the Gentiles about Jesus, to tell them of

the miracles Jesus performed and the good news he proclaimed,

the death Jesus suffered and his resurrection on the third day,

the post-resurrection appearances Jesus made to the disciples and his command to preach and bear witness to the good news,

the forgiveness of sins offered to all who believe in him.

It was while he was speaking to them that Peter was rudely interrupted by the Holy Spirit, his elegant sermon drowned out by a clatter of tongues and quacks and shouts of praise from the lips of the Gentiles. It wasn’t the eloquence of his sermon that inspired them; it was the wind of the Holy Spirit that swept them away before Peter had baptized them or asked for their confession of faith or handed them offering envelopes or even invited them to new member classes.

God took the initiative to welcome those Gentiles into the family of faith. God didn’t wait for them to choose God; **God chose them**! That choice awed the Jewish Christians who believed that they alone had been chosen; their lives had been spent observing boundaries and building fences to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world, separating clean from unclean by circumcision and obedience to the Law. Before their eyes those fences were swept away as the formerly unclean Gentiles were welcomed into the community of Christ. “*Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit as we have*?” asked Peter. And of course no one could, for the Gentiles had been chosen by God.

The Bible is a story of faith that has this consistent message: **God chooses**! God chooses to create the world in which we live and humans to populate it. God chooses Noah to build an ark and Abraham to be the great patriarch of God’s people. God chooses Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. God chooses David to be king and chooses prophets to call God’s people back from their errant ways. God chooses Mary to bear the Son of God and John to herald his coming. God chooses to come among us in Jesus to save us, to show us how to live, and to call us to follow God’s faithful path of love for the world, even if it leads to the cross. Jesus chooses disciples to travel with him, to learn from him, and to be apostles sharing his good news with the world. Jesus chooses Peter to be the rock upon which the church is built and chooses Paul from a Damascus Road to be a messenger of God’s good news for the Gentiles.

It is a good thing that God chooses, because we humans are terrible choosers! Adam and Eve choose to eat the fruit of the one tree they were not supposed to touch. The Israelites in the wilderness make bad choice after bad choice after bad choice on their sojourn to the Promised Land, to the point that you wonder if God isn’t ready to scrap the whole project and start over. God’s chosen king, David, makes an adulterous choice with Bathsheba and then magnifies it by having her husband killed. The disciples make bad choices on a daily basis, asking which will be first in the kingdom of God, denying even knowing Jesus on the night of his arrest, and forgetting completely his predictions of his death and rising on the third day. We continue that tradition of bad choices – sins we call them – yet God continues to choose us, to love us, to persevere with us through it all.

Acts is the story of God’s choosing an ever-widening circle of faith, an ever-growing community of Christ that began with a core group of faithful disciples and expanded to include Jews who recognized him as Messiah, then Samaritans, then Gentiles who feared God, and then Gentiles who had never even known God. The church grew, not because the disciples were such eloquent speakers or able salesmen, but because the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through their lives broke down barrier after barrier with love, grace and faith to welcome diverse men, women, and children into the family of God. It began with twelve ragtag disciples who never volunteered for the job, but were chosen by Jesus. Fishermen and tax collectors, not a statesman among them, were those whom Jesus chose to build the church.

Why did Jesus choose such unqualified men to be his disciples and ambassadors for the faith? Perhaps it was to show that with God anything is possible. They were not uniquely gifted, but they were willing to go and be the instruments through whom the Holy Spirit could be at work to bear fruit from the divine vine. The Gentiles baptized in Cornelius’ home were the fruit of the Spirit at work in that place through Peter. Two thousand years later we are the fruit of the Spirit’s work through generations before us, and we are called to go and bear more fruit with that same Holy Spirit at work in our midst.

Today we celebrate the ordination and installation of those whom God has chosen to be elders for this congregation over these next years. They did not volunteer. God chose them, and God promises to be at work in and through them by that same Spirit which was at work in Cornelius’ home 2,000 years ago, a Spirit that has guided elders in this congregation for over sixty years. What then do these elders who come to be ordained and installed have to say about the God who chose them? Listen to them:

*I believe in the tremendous power of the Holy Spirit, which descended upon the apostles, the early believers and upon believers through the ages and still is ever present with us today. I believe the Holy Spirit has been given to believers to give us gumption, beyond our own frail human intentions, to follow Christ’s commandments to us to love God, love others, spread the gospel, and live in true community with others, both in our local church and community, and worldwide. (Louise Scott)*

*Over time I have reconnected with my faith. What didn't seem too important many years ago now has meaning. And not just because I'm old and want to go to heaven, sometime in the distant future, but because I want to be a worthy disciple (today). I know that I have to ask for God’s help and forgiveness of my sins. I also trust that God will be there for me.* *(Mike Norris)*

*Faith is not simply a one-time event, but an ongoing condition. Well, I have that “ongoing condition” …. That saving grace is a gracious gift of God that God, and God alone, produces in my heart. (Anne Bell)*

*I believe that God is available to us at all times and for all reasons….God is not there to bully or punish us. We humans can do that to each other quite well. God’s there to love us through our sadness, our joys, our mistakes, and our successes. I feel God must also scratch his head at many of the things we do. (Elissa McDonald)*

*I believe the Holy Spirit guides us to live as better people…. I believe we are responsible for our choices and actions…. we are saved not by being good people, but by faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior…. I believe all should be welcome to attend CPC. Church should be a diverse and open place, [and] we should love our neighbor as ourselves. (Tad Shuey)*

*We too are called to be obedient to God’s call. We are to be like Peter, opening our eyes to possibilities that we hadn’t considered before…. We are to be willing to abandon beliefs that we have held for a long time that aren’t in line with God’s plan in order to bring others to [God]. (Janice Rockwell)*

God chooses! We respond. How then will you respond? We can try to deny God’s choice, try to avoid God’s choice, try to run from God’s choice as Jonah did – how did that work out for him in the belly of the whale? Or we can respond by saying, “Here I am, Lord! Send me! Use me!” God chooses us and we respond with gratitude, with trust that God’s Spirit is guiding us along the way, with faith that God can use us as we are where we are for God’s good purposes, with hope in the promises of God which were for Peter and Cornelius, for Jew and for Gentile, for you and for me. How then will you respond, not if, but when God chooses you? Amen