

# Sermon Text for November 12, 2017

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Isaiah 6:6-8, Romans 11:1-6

## ***“Chosen by Grace”***

As we gather here this Sunday to celebrate 185 years of the life of this church it is a celebration. It is a time that we not only celebrate those who have gone before us, those who have paved the way, but today we also take in new members who will be part of that long line of believers who sacrificed of their time and of their efforts to make this family even more open to become the kingdom of God. We celebrate today, we come together in this place which we call a sanctuary. It is a place of safety, a place where historically if you are being sought by the law, you can find refuge here, because it is a safe place for everyone, a haven for those who may not feel worthy.

Last Sunday a community gathered in Texas to celebrate the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in a place not too dissimilar to this one. Their worship, their gathering of those saved by grace was interrupted and destroyed tragically by an individual whose sole purpose was to hurt, to kill, to terrorize lives. A white Christian terrorist struck at the heart of what many of us would find sacred, inviolable. I don't mean to begin this celebration with a downer, but we have to begin today not just remembering those who died in that church, but we also have to remember how at any moment, in any place, our lives might be over. Last Sunday ought to be a reminder that we are not in control of our lives, so we have to hand our lives over to Jesus who actually is in control.

If nothing else, last Sunday was a reminder of how feeble and fickle our life is, like the leaves that were full on the trees this past week, but now have come down without pause. It is a reminder that God chooses us, we do not choose God. And when God does choose us, he has chosen us by grace. This is what Paul talks about in Romans today.

This whole concept of being chosen is so very misunderstood and yet it is one that Paul uses constantly in his writings. The only time we might have heard it is when we as Presbyterian are called the frozen chosen. But there is so much more to it than that. Romans as we have seen over these past years focuses more on the why and the how Christ did what he did and what difference Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make in our lives.

Today in Romans Paul tells us very clearly that what Jesus Christ did on the cross and in his resurrection is a confirmation and is key to understanding that we are chosen by grace because of what God did. Let's try to understand what we mean when we say as Christians that we are chosen by grace.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

There is no greater example that I can think of how one's choices affect our lives than when I think of Pat Tillman. You may not know who Pat Tillman was. He was a safety for the Arizona Cardinals from 1998 to 2001. After 9-11 happened he walked away from football, he walked away from a 3.6 million dollar contract to join the Army and go into the special forces. He could have spent his entire life as a football player, comfortable, without a financial care in the world. But he sought and found something far deeper than the game of football was able to provide him. His joining the services was for him a fulfillment of a calling and it created within him a sense of satisfaction that he was pursuing his calling, his purpose in life.

Pat Tillman was killed in 2004 in Afghanistan serving our country. On this veteran's day we remember those who served our country in the armed forces, who choose to serve. Some may say what a waste, what a poor decision on his part, he didn't have to die. I say he made a choice based upon that which was driven by his convictions, and not by anything else. How many of us seek jobs, satisfaction, gratification that may provide immediate joy, glory, but offer no redeeming value. How many of us have jobs or are involved in activity after activity that gives you absolutely no sense that you are contributing to the betterment of the world around you or that you really feel called to do what you are doing? I would guess quite a few. And most of us feel like we don't have a choice, what we are doing is where we are and we cannot change, too much is at stake. I would argue that too much is at stake if we don't seriously consider changing what we are doing if what we are doing provides nothing for us and we know it.

The choices that we make have such an impact upon our lives that it is often hard to see our lives as anything but a series of choices. Sometimes we think the choices are out of our control and that things just kind of happen to us, instead of us being able to influence any direction in our lives. I would argue that the choices we make concerning our actions, our jobs, our families need to be based not upon financial security, not upon immediate gratification, but upon Christ the solid rock I stand, from that all else follows.

Today Paul tells us that the most important decision and choice that affects us is completely out of our hands. There are certain choices that we have and that we have to make in order to be assured of following God's will, but ironically, the most important choice that we would have in our lives is not ours to make. Paul tells us something that we do not want to hear. We are all control freaks, some of us more than others, but the decision to be loved by God has already been made. That is a big deal. There is no bigger deal than to be loved by God. And we want to control even that.

God is the one who chooses us from the beginning of time. Listen to that again and see how it affects you, God has chosen us from the beginning of time. Do you not realize that the fact that God chose you is supposed to lead you to repentance because it allows that very heavy burden of the world to drop from your shoulders and allows you to respond out of freedom instead of from bondage.

Look at our Isaiah Scripture this morning. We know this Scripture because it contains the words of the hymn that bring a tear to our eyes: here I am Lord, it is I Lord. But before these verses, this volunteering by Isaiah, and before he chose to go with God what happens in verses 6-7. It is God who sends a seraph with a live coal, touched his mouth, seared whatever vileness there might have been. Now, now not once you make a decision, a commitment, not once you've been baptized, but now on God's initiative on God's choice your guilt has departed, your sin is blotted out.

Now, not that Jesus has died on the cross, was beaten for our transgressions, was crucified for our sins. Now, now that Jesus was raised from the dead and conquered death, now, now, God has removed our guilt, your sin has been removed.

This has happened because God chose to do it for you and your acceptance of it or not does not change the fact that God chose to do it for you. Then, and only then, do we get Isaiah saying: Here I am Lord, send me. Send me because I see the choice that you made for me, that you sent your son, send me. Jesus, God chose us even before we could choose God, and that should lead us to repentance and a life that is constantly being asked to be sent.

Why do you think we have a hard time accepting the fact that it is God who does the choosing. Why do you think we create scenarios where unless we say the right words, or unless we pray the right salvation prayer, or unless we are baptized again, and again, and again, just in case the Roman Catholic one did not take as an infant, or the

Presbyterian one as an adolescent didn't take, then as an adult we need to give you the full plunge, just in case.

Maybe because of the culture in which we live we are used to making all the decisions. I was talking to someone the other day and we both realized how similar we were in wanting to control things. Even if we ask someone to do something for us, we are still kind of hovering around them, because in the back of the mind no matter how they do it, it can't be as good as we wanted to do it. We usually end up doing it all over again just the way we want it. Does that sound like you? Or does that sound like your spouse? Well, in this situation it is as if God's choosing us is rendered meaningless by our choices. That is impossible.

Listen to Paul. Paul is talking about a group of people who made choices in relationship to Jesus that were absolutely wrong. The Jews in Paul's and Jesus' day had completely rejected Jesus. They were instrumental in his torture, his death by crucifixion, they did not believe he was the Messiah. They chose not to follow Jesus.

Well, the natural progression of things would make you think that hey, if they chose to reject God then surely, look at verse 1, God has rejected his people. Paul says, no way, impossible. Again verse 2, God has not rejected his people. The proof that Paul gives is that of Elijah who pleads with God and says of all the Israelites there is only one who remains who has not turned their back on you. That one is talking to you now. The implication is Lord, wipe them out and start over with me.

Elijah looks around him and thinks he understands what is going to happen. As if he is able to discern by peoples' choices who is committed to God, who is one of God's people. Do not find yourself like Elijah declaring who has chosen to be in and who has chosen to be out because you are likely to hear God's loving voice reply saying: this is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, I have chosen them, by grace.

God's response to Elijah is what we have been saying all along. There is a group who is set apart, 7,000. Now 7 is seen as the number of completeness, 7 days, 70X7. So it would not be too big a stretch to understand God as saying I am saving a remnant, a group and they have been chosen by grace. I have chosen them.

This term grace has been tossed around so much that its meaning has been lost. Grace, in the Greek *charis*, means kindness. They have been chosen, you have been chosen because of God's kindness. Look at I Corinthians 13:4 and it will give you a

similar perspective on grace. Love is patient, love is xaris, love is grace, love is kind. Our being chosen by God, the last verse here, has nothing to do with our performance, and it has everything to do with God's kindness. If we were chosen because of what we did then it would not be grace, and so grace would not be kindness but rather God giving us what we deserve, and thank God, God gives us what he has chosen, kindness, and not what we deserve.

Today we may feel a bit like Elijah. God, I am the only one who does Jesus' will. We may be focusing on our own choices and trying so hard to make our will God's will, when in fact we are really trying to make our will God's will.

Take a deep breath. You have been chosen by grace. God is good all the time, God is grace all the time, God's kindness and gentleness is seen in his love for us that he did not even hold back his son for us. This understanding that we have of being chosen by God should lead you away from sin and to repentance. It should create a desire to say here I am Lord, send me.

Be ready to be sent, because God is calling you to do God's work now. Amen.