



*“Just because: God has chosen you.”*

*1 Thessalonians 1:1-10*

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

20th Sunday After Pentecost, Sunday, October 22nd, 2017

The Rev. Zachary Lysdahl

Over the next six weeks Frosty and I will be preaching from 1 Thessalonians. A little background information will help us understand the letter and its importance for our lives. 1 Thessalonians was written by a guy named Paul. Someone well known throughout Christianity, but who is he? Well, Paul didn't always go by the name Paul. Actually, for most of his life he was known as Saul. Saul was a Jew from the city of Taurus. As a young man he went to Jerusalem to study under rabbis, Jewish scholars of the Law. He succeeded in school and went on to be a passionate persecutor of Christians. Sometime later, Saul was on his way to Damascus, a neighboring city, when a light from heaven, like a bolt of lightning flashed all around him and caused him to become blind. At the same time he heard a distinct voice and asked “Who are you Lord?” That question started a conversation between Jesus Christ and Saul, which resulted in Saul being transformed and gaining his sight back. The divine encounter moved Saul from prosecuting and jailing Christians to he himself sharing God's superabundant love with the world and starting many churches, including the one at Thessalonica. It was also the result of that event which changed Saul's name to Paul. So Saul went from making it his life goal of putting Christians in jail (Acts 9:2) to becoming Paul whose mission was to build churches and to disciple Christians. I think, Paul made one of the greatest about-faces recorded.

Now that we know a little more about Paul, what about the Thessalonians?

Thessalonica was a harbor town in what is now Greece. It was also connected to many other cities by a major highway, which made it a hotbed for diverse industry. Thus, Thessalonica was a place of many cultures and religions. In the city religion was a free-for-all. People living there would pick and choose who and what they believed in. And so, the Thessalonians were polytheistic, believing in many different gods all at the same time. Amazingly Paul was able to plant a church there and it took root, because Christianity is monotheistic. We believe there is only one true and living God. However, that church struggled both internally and externally. Some of the struggles they faced had to do with questions about theology, what does it mean to be “chosen

by God” and how does one responded to being chosen? They also struggled with questions about relevance, what difference was the church they making in their community? More than anything they wondered how they could keep going in a society that, as Paul states, caused them “severe suffering.” So Paul took up pen and paper and wrote to them.

Paul wrote to them for many reasons. And in the first 10 verses Paul wrote to them about God and Jesus Christ, and to encourage them to press on. He wrote to affirm that they did have a significant impact on their community even if it wasn't immediately visible. He also wrote to encourage them to remain hopeful and steadfast despite the persecution they were suffering. In verse 4 he told them something of immeasurable comfort. He said to them “brothers and sisters loved by God, he has chosen you.” God has chosen you.

On the way to Pilgrims Park with the confirmands and the confirmand team a few weeks back we played a game called “Would you rather.” The game is simple. One person gives a choice between two options. Something like “would you rather have a muffin or a doughnut for breakfast every day for the rest of your life.” “Without question, doughnuts!” Doughnuts are my favorite sweet. I enjoy doughnuts so much that I like the whole process of getting them, whether it's from Schnucks Grocery Store or Trefzger's Bakery. I'll never turn one down. But I'm particular about my doughnuts. When I walk up to the counter I carefully peer into the case of doughy goodness, inspecting each and everyone. I have criteria for selecting them. First the ratios need to be just right. There cannot be too much dough and not enough frosting. The frosting needs to go all the way up to the edge. However, it shouldn't spill over the edge because then my fingers get sticky. And if you eat the doughnut on the way to work, which I occasionally may do, then the steering wheel gets sticky too. What a mess! So ratios are crucial when selecting a doughnut. What is in the doughnut is important too. If its a yeast doughnut there shouldn't be anything crunchy or gooey inside. It should simply be light and fluffy, easy to pull apart, and, of course, sweet. Yeast doughnuts ought to be topped with a glaze or a simple frosting in my opinion. Cake doughnuts are a different matter. They can be covered with fruit toppings, chocolate chips, or sprinkles. I think cakes doughnuts have a little more freedom when it comes to do's and dont's. When I finally pick out a doughnut, or two, like I said, it's a process, I always make sure to pick out just right one. I make my selection based on what I see and what I think it should be.

Praise be to God that God does not make selections based on my doughnut criteria or things would be rather messed up. Sometimes we'd like to overlay our decision making

process on God. We make our selections based on what we can see, what we can perceive, and what we can prove. We live in an empirical society. We want data and hard facts. We want repeatability and proof. That is what we sometimes expect of God: proof, data, and hard facts. So when Paul writes “God has chosen you.” We want to know why? What criteria did God use to make his selection. Did God base his selection on what he saw? Is it because we are frosted just right? Did God base his decision on irrefutable data? What criteria did God use?

We think that mysteries are fine so long as they are confined to novels, TV shows, and maybe Bigfoot or Nessy the Lockness Monster, but never with God. We tend to think that mystery shouldn't be a factor in God's selection because mystery doesn't provide data to back up its reasoning. We want to know God's criteria. We think that if we could comprehend God's basis for selection we could make sure to meet those criteria, to keep the frosting from going over the side, to make sure we are just right.

The truth is God is mysterious and so too are God's reasons for choosing you. Although mystery can be uncomfortable, when it comes to God mystery is a good thing because it shows us that God is God and we are humans. The prophet Isaiah points out that God's ways are not necessarily our ways nor God's thoughts our thoughts (Isaiah 58:8). This should give us comfort because the mystery of God helps us to realize just how marvelous, how creative, and how limitless God truly is. We don't serve a God who is bound or constrained. Our God is all powerful, all knowing, and present everywhere and at all times. Yes, God is mysterious and that is a relief.

The means by which God has chosen you brothers and sisters is impossible to understand, explain, or identify, but that doesn't change the fact that you have been chosen by God. The Reverend Dr. Coral M. Bechtel puts it this way “We are loved [chosen], pure and simple, not because of our accomplishments or our beauty, or strength, or our intelligence, but just because.” (Glimpses of Grace, pg 17). God's reasons for choosing you might not be known here on earth, we don't have any science to explain it, however, you are chosen, there no ifs, ands, or buts about it. God has elected you, you are just the right one, which means there are responsibilities.

In verse nine and ten Paul shares with us what our threefold response to God. We are to “turn to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” Turn, serve, and wait. That is how we, loved and chosen by God, are to respond to our election.

I don't think doughnuts and Paul's opening verses in Thessalonians have ever been paired together before, but I do think it helps to illustrate Paul's point. We are loved by God and chosen by God, but God does not use human criteria to make his selection. God's ways of choosing are mysterious and they are reassuring. We don't have to do anything impressive to be loved by God. God has known us since before anything was created. Although we don't understand this mystery it is one of comfort. Our God is bigger than us, wiser than we can know and that frees us up to be human and accept there are some divine realities that we won't fully understand, and that is alright.

You have been thought about by God for millennia. You are loved by God just because. So go, turn, serve, and wait.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.