

## “THE CHOOSERS AND THE CHOSEN”

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When we recently received 16 new members, I thought we were done welcoming newcomers, maybe until autumn. All indications show yet another group of 6-10 ready to unite with First Congregational Church. I love welcoming others alongside to join us in praise and service. For me it is a mystery how this happens and it is bigger than me or any of us. Yes, how we receive guests and what ministries we offer do matter. But it's greater than that. Members come to feel led here or at home here or eager to serve here for motives deeper than any of us can fathom.

Discernment is the word here for finding our way to church, or even through life. Soren Kierkegaard gave a helpful image for what it means to discern God's will. Pretend as though you've been given an envelope. Inside that envelope are your marching orders, who you're meant to be, and what you're meant to do with your gifts. Inside that envelope is God's will for you and you alone. Your job is to discern those marching orders *without being able to open the envelope*. Seldom are we able to do that alone within ourselves. That is why God gives us one another. That's why the basic unit for our faith is the church community, not the individual. Remember that we are here to please God. And that is highest joy we can know.

Starting our search for an associate pastor, I like how chair Jon Bigelow used the word discernment on Sunday as we gathered hints to guide our search. After all, we aren't hiring an employee. We're calling a pastor. Discernment respects the mystery of that somehow, of larger purposes being served, a bigger plan at work.

The truth is the church is in a different business than anywhere else. We do business differently than anywhere else. Mark my words, the degree to which we insist on worldlier ways of handling what are in fact sacred mysteries is generally the degree to which any church will lose its mojo, lose its vitality and lose its way. *How* we do business is even more important than reaching lofty goals we set up.

So what's the opposite of discernment? Let's go back to receiving new members. Sometimes I hear of people who are church shopping. Call me fussy if you like. But is it all right with you if I am uncomfortable describing newcomers entering this or any community of faith as "church shopping"? I was reflecting on why I am so uncomfortable with that. It is not just because some construe the phrase as crass and lacking in grace. It is not just because sometimes I hear pastors describe a certain type of self-centered member, here today and gone tomorrow, depending upon how much the church caters to their whims, as church shoppers.

It's not just because church shopping sounds so consumerist, like buying a new toaster. Sometimes we fancy ourselves consumers. But one scholar claims that in the Bible, consumers are things like swarms of locusts. If you have ever fled the consuming hordes of Black Friday, you know what the guy meant by that.

In truth, I recoil from the term “church shopping” for reasons even deeper than these. Reasons that are very much a part of our Gospel lesson today. Jesus is talking about how we become his disciples. He is talking about the very best of why he came and what he gives in terms of delivering God’s love to us from high; and expecting us, even commanding us, to share that love with one another. If we can pull that off, Jesus insists, God’s joy is in us and our joy will be complete. From there, Jesus is at pains to have us know how all of this gets transacted.

”You did not choose me but I chose you,” he reminds us, “And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” (Jn. 15.16) In the liturgy I use to receive new members, you always hear me use those words welcoming newcomers. You did not choose me, but I chose you. Let me share with you where I’m going with this.

Most of want to think of our religion as something that’s finally up to us to choose. But today Jesus reminds us that we didn’t so much choose him. No, he chose us. God took the initiative, we responded. Discipleship was his idea for us, not ours. Our faith in God rests not upon our choosing God but upon our God choosing us.

Here’s an example of the difference this makes. No doubt many of us have been proselytized by unwitting evangelicalist Christians. Often their lead question goes something like, “When were you saved? When did you accept Jesus and take him into your heart?” Part of me wants to be able to respond to them as a fellow Christian. But I find questions like these to be awkward and unhelpful. For me the words feel like an ill-fitting suit, I have trouble putting them on and wearing them.

So I reply, “I was saved 2,000 years ago on a hill called Golgotha. When were you saved? I cling to the hope that Jesus accepts me and would gladly be taken into his heart. My heart is too small to contain him. But his heart is big enough to contain me and everyone else this world writes off.” Can you hear the difference?

It’s the opposite direction. What’s most decisive isn’t that we chose and accepted Jesus. What matters most is God taking the initiative, to choose and save us in Christ. Of course, we must accept God’s acceptance of us. But that’s secondary.

It might sound like a small thing. But where we put the accent on choice--our choosing coming first or God’s choosing--makes all of the difference in the world. If we think of faith in the same terms we approach food courts, TV channels, and voting—where *our* choice is supreme—we’ll reduce it so severely as to cripple it.

Here is a secular example of that. A parent of their firstborn claims with no small amount of pride, “We are not raising our child in any particular house of worship. We want little Jimmy to be free to choose for himself when he is a grown adult.” Have you ever heard this before? I’ve not heard it much, but it makes me groan.

For what kind of freedom is that? Not a freedom that I want for any child I know. The effect of this move by parents isn't to empower children as spiritual beings. They will not know one option in the universe of spiritual choices to be discerned. Can you imagine saying, "We are not speaking or teaching any particular language like English to our child. We want Jimmy to choose for himself as grownup." It is virtually the same thing. It means Jimmy will be mute and ignorant because he is conversant in no language and doesn't even really know what language is. Even smart folks can be obtuse about faith while we imagine ourselves experts.

As Christians we bring a different perspective on choice. For more essential than anything we could choose is the world-changing, life-altering reality that God has definitively chosen us through Jesus' birth and life, his death and resurrection.

This runs counter to the American mindset where personal choice is exalted as ultimate freedom. Whether it is the political left or the right, nothing is more important than maintaining the sovereignty of individuality and independent choice. That is why our culture becomes such a chilly aggregate of isolated individuals rather than anything like cohesive community. That is why America has become an aggregation of friendly strangers rather than neighbors who know and show up for one another with support and challenge. Many who unite with this church these days and many who have been here for years are here because of how we show up for one another. How we care when it matters most. How we are willing to put the good of Christ working through this church ahead of our personal preferences. We got that way, friends, putting God's choices ahead of our own.

Friends, that's not only how we find our way forward through this challenge we've taken on. That's how we discern at crucial junctures making our way through life. Here is one practical way to go about it. When you must make an important decision, when you must choose among options, when you must discern a path, don't put yourself in the middle of that like the world exists to please and favor us.

"You did not choose me but I chose you," Jesus told those followers who thought it was about them. "And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." So God chooses our path as faith community. So we submit ourselves to his will. Amen.

Lord Jesus, in your glorious resurrection, you defeated death, broke the bonds of evil, and took your place in glory. Yet you not only defeated death, but then you came back to your disciples. You chose them, called them and empowered them. And you called us to be part of your redeeming, resurrecting, joy-inflecting work. You made us your agents in the world. You took us in and made us your friends. In choosing us you decided to love each of us as though we were the only one.

Give us what we need to be worthy of your faith in us. Equip us to do the work to which you have called us. When we listen for the voice that would bid us to take the correct path, help us to hear voices other than our own. Help us to hear your voice, and in listening to you, to know that you often speak through other people.