

2 May 2010 “**Chosenness**” by Rusty Butler Genesis 4:1-7; 1st Peter 2:9

Have you ever bit off more than you could chew? I know that is a cliché but I’ve done it any number of times. I should learn better but I keep doing it.

It happens at buffets. My eyes are bigger than my stomach. It happened one time at Flintstone Park in Custer, S.D. We had gone there when the boys were little to see Fred and Barney and Wilma and Betty. It had to be about 95 degree that day and we were walking around the park just playing on different things at Flintstone Park, taking pictures of the kids. There was a playground there and in the middle of it there was a concrete structure of a snake that you could crawl through. Some kids were standing around wondering about crawling through there and I decided to try it. Got down on my belly and began to crawl through it on my elbows and knees. I started out pretty good. But it got long and hot, it had to be 120 degrees when I got to the middle. People were gathered around at the end of the snake , I could hear a kid saying, “some guy is crawling through there and he’s been in there a long time.” I heard Lynn yell in, “Russ are you alright?” I almost didn’t make it out the other end. Bit off more than I could chew. Have you ever done something like that?

When I started this subject of chosenness, it felt like something I could get my arms around, but soon enough it became clear...I’d done it again. The idea of God choosing one group or another is bigger than I ever expected. I’m sure I can’t do it justice in the time we’ve got here, but what I hope happens is that you’ll turn it over in your minds and perhaps talk with your

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spouse or a friend or a group of friends or maybe even me or Valerie about it. I'd be interested to hear what you think.

Today we're going to consider the idea of chosenness. Would you pray with me?

O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts help us in understanding the life of faith and the faith in life.

I believe we've all had the experience of being chosen. At one time or another, someone or another has chosen us. It very well might have been for a good thing...some of us have had the special feeling of being the favorite son or daughter, the favorite grandchild, maybe the teacher's pet. Have you ever been the teacher's pet? Some of you have been chosen in place of other employees for an award or a position or a certain task. Many times we've been chosen for something good.

Sometimes, of course, we've been chosen for something not so good...not so positive. Chosen to go down and check the noise in the basement, chosen to be the one laid off, chosen to go out and get something or do something for someone at the most inopportune time. I don't what it might have been but we all know what it means to be chosen.

A couple of weeks ago, I got a call out of the blue from some acquaintances, that I'd met here at church. They are not members of our church...but they had free tickets to go to a Garth Brooks fund raising concert that they'd received from their daughter who works for his charity and they remembered that I liked Garth Brooks. They wanted to know if Lynn and I wanted to go. Even though it was a Saturday night and we try

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not to do much on Sat. Nights, I called Lynn and asked her and she said, “of course”. So we got chosen to go see Garth Brooks at the place where they hold the National Western Stock Show Radio.

The concert was supposed to start at 8:30...we got there early and found our seats by the people who’d given us the tickets. It was a fund raiser and

they proceeded to have an auction and some videos and the concert didn’t start until 10:15 for crying out loud...way past our bedtime and the thing is we had to act like that didn’t bother us.

We felt like there was a responsibility to the one’s who’d chose us to be gracious and appreciative about the whole thing.

We’ve all at one time or another been the chosen ones. Sometimes it feels good to be the chosen ones but there is a responsibility that comes with it.

One of the important themes of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament is that the Jews are the chosen people. That God chooses the Jewish people over all the other people in the world to be God’s people. We hear and see it again and again in the texts.

Listen to just a few of them:

Psalm 33: 12 Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

Psalm 105:43-44 So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the Lord!

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Psalm 132...For the Lord has chosen Zion; This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it. David's enemies I will cloth with disgrace, but on him, his crown will gleam."

Isaiah 41: 8 ff But you Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend... you are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off; do not fear for I am with you do not be afraid for I am your God.

It seems to start from the beginning in the book of Genesis. Cain and Abel both bring a sacrifice and Abel's sacrifice is chosen by God and Cain's is rejected.

And we catch a glimpse of what it means to be the chosen one. Sometimes it will not turn out good.

We go on, Abraham is chosen seemingly out of the blue to be the father of the Israelite's, he's done nothing to deserve being chosen by God, he just is. To try and explain it rationally makes little or no sense.

One author tries to explain it this way. He says, chosenness was about God's plan for the whole world and learning to accept that God's blessing flows through the world in mysterious ways, that while merciful, are not, strictly speaking, equitable.

He catches the unfairness in it.

Dr. Pam Eisenbaum, who is a Jewish New Testament scholar at Iliff takes a crack at explaining the idea in her recent book, *Why Paul Was Not a Christian*. She wrote that the special Jewish vocation is for the Jews to be a Light to the nations, spreading monotheism, social justice, loving kindness to the rest of the world.

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But still I can't help but wonder about the idea. I'm not the only one...

When Charles DeGaulle was the president of France, he identified the idea of Jewish chosenness as the cause of anti-Semitism in others.

A Greek composer, told an interviewer that, "today it is possible to say that this small nation (meaning Israel) is the root of all evil; it is full of self-importance and evil stubbornness." And when asked by the Jewish interviewer what holds the Jewish people together, he replied, "It is the feeling that you are the children of God. That you are chosen."

One writer has said the very idea of God choosing a certain group is retrograde in every way that matters to the progressive mind.

Yet the idea of a chosen people won't die. The early Christians, many of them Jewish Christians took up the idea and carried it forward.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says to the disciples I have chosen you out of the world.

In the letter to the Church in Collosae, Paul writes to the church, As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, cloth yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

In the letter of 1st Peter, written approximately 75-95 a.d. we read,

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

The early church decided they were the chosen ones.

So it seems to me that here is where we are now. There was a time, centuries in fact, when the question was, which group was chosen by God?

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Different groups had different answers. But now the question is how can there be a chosen people at all?

Did the whole idea of chosenness come about because God chose a group of people or did the idea come about because groups of people felt they had been chosen by God? Does that make a difference?

Because when there is a chosen group, there has to be a group that is not chosen and that seems entirely unfair.

Perhaps we should just let the whole idea go.

One group of Reformed Jews in Berlin back in 1844 wrote, the concept of holiness and of a special vocation has become entirely foreign to us, as has the idea of an intimate covenant between God and Israel which is to remain significant for all eternity. Human character and dignity, and God's image within us-these alone are sign of chosenness.

Maybe that's the way we should think about who is chosen by God...we can see who is chosen by God through people's character and dignity and that goes far beyond one religion.

I don't know what the answer is. But where else do we go to consider ideas like chosenness? I hope we can come here to a place that doesn't turn its back on the hard questions but that encourages the quest for understanding even when the answers may not be clear.

When the idea of chosenness appears or arises, and it will in the politics of the day may we recognize it for what it is. May we see the benefits of it in history and recognize too the dangers.

And may we be wise as serpents and gentle as doves. Amen.

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Today we are going to share in communion. It is a special ritual for Christians. It lets them know that they are part of a larger community. In some places and at some times, there have been those that wanted to restrict the sharing of Communion to just those who professed Jesus as Lord and Savior.

We are going to invite people to join the church this morning. When they become members of the church it is a covenant. A promise by the members of the church to do something for and with the new members. It is a promise made by the new people to share in the life of the community, working and worshiping being a part of things.