

Sermon: "Chosen"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
10/20/02
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

CORRUPT RELIGION

Several years ago on the TV program, Good Morning America, Susan Sarandon was talking about her role as a nun fighting against the death penalty in her film, Dead Man Walking. The interviewer, (I think it was Charlie Gibson) knowing that Susan was a Buddhist said, "This is really a very Christian film. Your character is quoting Jesus all the time."

Sarandan clearly flustered by anyone thinking that she really was like the character she portrayed replied, "Well, it's really Buddhism. It's really all religion before it becomes corrupted as they all do"

That's a popular viewpoint with many people that somehow institutional religion is the problem ... that it always becomes corrupted. The caustic comedian, Lenny Bruce once put it this way, "Every day people are staying away from the church and going back to God."

Certainly, in all times and places the Christian faith has been distorted by the weaknesses and mistakes of those who claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. The church has been and always will be a very imperfect messenger of the gospel.

But, I would take issue with the idea that we can somehow get closer to God by staying away from church as if our own personalized version of faith could somehow be better than the faith that has been passed down to us by the biblical record of God's grace and salvation that is celebrated in the church. Quite often our modern "personalized" versions of the faith become even more self serving than the institutions we criticize.

THE GOSPEL OF THE WEAK

Despite the many flaws of the church, the message of the gospel still shines through her witness. We in the church ... at least in our better moments have always admitted to our weak and sinful nature. Indeed, that's the first thing we talk about in my confirmation class. It's the "A" in what we call the ABCDs of faith. In order to come to faith, we have to first admit something. We are sinners. We are self-centered people who tend to do the wrong thing rather than the right thing.

But, the Bible tells us that our corruption and sinful nature are not the final word. We learn that those weaknesses and sins can be forgiven. We learn that God's Word can be proclaimed even by weak and sinful people like us.

Indeed, we can see in almost every story told in the Old and New Testaments that those who were called by God often failed miserably to answer that call faithfully. They misunderstood. They were afraid. They willfully disobeyed. They listened only to what they wanted to hear instead of the message that God was bringing them.

In other words, they were prime examples of that corrupt, institutionalized religion to which Susan Sarandan referred. But, despite their disobedience and their weakness, God was able to use them to further the kingdom. The power of God's choice proved to be stronger than human weakness and the evil that filled the world.

JARS OF CLAY

I believe the same is true today.

This is a foundational truth that gives me hope and strength every day of my life.

The Bible tells us that the treasure of the gospel has been entrusted to us as imperfect and corrupt as we can be. Indeed, in a strange way, it is our weakness that makes us better messengers of the true gospel message. We have nothing to brag about when it is God who does it all. God's power flows most perfectly through one who knows his or her own weakness. (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9)

The apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 2 Cor. 4:6-7

When people tell me that they are not worthy to do this or that in the church, I quite happily agree with them. They are not worthy and neither am I. But, God's choice is not based upon merit. God's choice is based upon grace.

Those people that we read about in the Bible are our models of what it means to be a Christian, but they are not perfect people by a long shot. They have all of the flaws that we have. They are as Paul put it, "clay jars."

In other words, the treasure, the message of salvation in Jesus Christ has been entrusted by God to weak and frail people like you and me. We are models of what God can do with ordinary people who are called according to his purpose. Though we are weak, God uses us to spread the good news of his salvation ... and, more than that, gives us the power to do his work.

CHOSEN TO WORK

We in the church get into trouble if we forget that the power comes not from us and our abilities but from God's gracious choice. That's what made the church at Thessalonica special. Paul told them that they were "chosen. They had been elected by God to spread the gospel. (1 Thessalonians 1:4)

And because the Christians at Thessalonica had this sense of God's call, they were a people whose lives were filled with power. They were a people of deep conviction and a community filled with good works. Paul wrote,

[3] We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thes. 1:3 (NIV)

Notice that it was their sense of being chosen by God that led to a changed way of life. Faith led to work. Love led to labor. Hope led to endurance.

Sometimes people confuse belief with faith. There is a difference.

For example, I might believe that aerobic exercise is important for cardiovascular health. I can read books about it. I can buy exercise machines that are designed to produce it. But, unless I act upon that knowledge unless I actually exercise several times a week I have not put my faith in that knowledge.

I believe that exercise is good, but I do not have faith because I don't put that belief into practice. And it does me no good.

I remember a friend telling me about his wife asking for one of those exercise videos for Christmas. He bought it for her, and later I asked him how she liked it.

He replied,
"Oh, she liked it just fine. She poured herself a coke to go with her cookies and sat down and watched it several times!"

I wonder if that isn't a picture of us when we believe but don't put that belief into action.

As James put it in the biblical letter bearing his name,
"... faith without works is dead .." James 2:20
Faith cannot exist without works.

In sports, we sometimes talk about a "team of destiny." Their fans have placards which read, "You've gotta believe." In other words, the team is driven by a sense that this is their year. Their performance and work ethic are driven by that sense of destiny.

In a more profound way, this deep sense of conviction is found in a Spirit filled church.

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT CHRISTIANITY?

Dean Hoge and Donald Luidens have done extensive research about why some mainline Protestant churches have been experiencing a decline as of late. The reason? A lack of conviction. They wrote,

"The underlying problem of the mainline church ... is the weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life ...

If the mainline churches want to regain their vitality, their first step must be to address theological issues head on. They must provide compelling answers to the question, 'What's so special about Christianity?'"

I believe that the answer to that question is found in the doctrine of election. What is so special about us? God has chosen us. God has chosen us and has given us a job to do.

The doctrine of election is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Again and again we learn that God chooses people to bring a message of salvation and hope to the whole world. God chose Abraham and Sarah. God chose Moses and Miriam. God chose the people of Israel.

Let me ask you a personal question,
"Do you believe in election?"
Do you believe that God has chosen people to spread the gospel, and to be models of hope and healing in this world? I do.

More than that, I believe that God has chosen you and me to preach the gospel and model that gracious message in word and deed.
I believe that you and I are special.
We are saints, called by God according to God's purpose.

Now I know. Some of you are thinking,
"The pastor has really gone off the deep end on this one.
I try my best, but I'm certainly no saint."

We often use the word saint to mean someone who is perfect
.... or at least near perfect.

But, that's not what the Bible means when the word saint is used.
A saint is not a perfect person.
A saint is someone who is chosen by God to do a job.

In fact, Paul uses the word saint to describe all the people who are members of the church in many of the letters he writes that are in our New Testament. He talks, for example, about the saints in Corinth certainly not perfect people if you know anything about that church but they were nonetheless saints, called to do God's will in that place.

And so it is for us as well. We are saints.
We are "holy" in that God has set us apart to do a special job.
God has a plan for our lives.
And it is this realization that God has a plan for our lives which brings us a sense of conviction and hope.

We are God's chosen ... and that makes all the difference.

GOD'S GRADING SCALE

Educational psychologists talk about something called a self fulfilling prophecy, that is, we tend to live up to (or down to) the opinion we have of ourselves ... and that opinion can also be influenced by what we think others think of us.

For example, years ago, in order to test the effect of grades upon student performance, an educational researcher had a teacher give a group of students arbitrary grades after their first quiz. Half of the class received high grades, regardless of their work. The other half of the class received poor grades.

After a few weeks the students were tested again.
This time the papers were graded honestly. Guess who did the best the second time? The students who were arbitrarily give high grades the first time. They lived up to the expectation. One student said, "I never knew I was so good in history until I took this course."

I think that's a parable of how the Christian life works.
God doesn't choose us because we're the best or the brightest.
Nor does God choose us in an arbitrary way like that educational experiment.

God chooses out of love.

Believe it or not God has chosen us you and me ... to be his disciples because God loves us.

We are (as the Bible puts it) the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12)
We have been chosen to embody God's will in the world.

We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). We are the way God has chosen to communicate with the world today.

Admittedly, we often fall short of that calling.
The church, like all other organizations, does become institutionalized and oblivious to her true purpose.

But, as the old hymn puts it,
God in Christ continues to "softly and tenderly" call us home.

God in Christ continues to remind us who we are and whose we are.

God has chosen us.
It is this belief, more than any other,
which gives us a sense of conviction and purpose.

LEARNING TO BELIEVE

The teacher had been working tirelessly with the student. He had been having trouble in math class; he couldn't seem to get it.

Part of the problem was that he didn't seem committed to getting it. He consistently failed to get his work done for class.

The student excused his lack of work by saying, "I'm just not any good at math."

The teacher replied,
"You know. I get the impression that I believe in you more than you believe in you."

She was right of course. The teacher knew that the student could do it. The teacher had chosen to help the student. But, before the student could improve, he had to have faith. He had to work under the assumption that his work could and would make a difference in his math skills.

Sometimes I think that we are like that math student when it comes to our relationship with Jesus. We know that God loves us, that God in Christ has chosen us for salvation and service.

And yet we do not act upon what we know.

Our congregation like all congregations is faced with many challenges.
We sometimes wonder about our future.
How can we do what we are called to do in this time and place?

The needs seem so great and our resources seem so small.

We know that in many ways in the past we have failed to live up to the high calling that is ours in Christ Jesus.

But, then we remember.
God has chosen us.

In First Peter, chapter two we read,

"We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light."

This is the faith statement which prompts us to work for the kingdom.

This is the faith statement which prompts us to love others.

This is the faith statement which gives us hope for the future
.... even when the world around us seems to be collapsing.

God has chosen us.

Those words are filled with power.
And if we put our faith in those words,
we will be changed forever.

Amen.

Sermon: "A Word for Anxious People"
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AN ANXIOUS DAY

I was late to work one day this week. Already a bit anxious I made my way up Pleasant Hill Road. As I stopped at the intersection and waited for the traffic to clear, an impatient motorist sped by on the shoulder.

Thinking that he was not quite awake, I laid on my horn to help him focus.
My anxiety increased.

When I reached the office, I found that the alarm had gone off and the police had been called. Can those folks at Brinks never learn? We don't want the police called during the day. We can't afford the "false alarm" charge levied by our police department. More anxiety.

Finally, I settled my nerves with a cup of coffee, and began to look at the Scripture lessons for this week. About that time I realized that we had forgotten to lock the door and one of the street people had made his way into my office. He was not happy with something that I had done and was there to "have it out with me."

You'll be happy to know that I did not say what I thought at that point, but I did manage to show my friend the door. At this point, I wondered if it might be a good idea to go home and start over. But, I sat down at my desk once more and, after answering three or four calls that were meant for the First Presbyterian Church of Orlando with trembling hands I opened the Bible to our lesson for today.

My eyes fell on verse 6,
"Do not be anxious about anything"
Right. That's easy for you to say Paul.
You haven't been through what I've been through this morning!

PAUL AND ANXIETY

And then I remembered. Actually, that's not true. As we discussed in last week's sermon, Paul had been through much worse than what I had been through that day. He had been persecuted for the faith. He was in jail. And his very life was on the line for the gospel.

Even the traffic on I-4 doesn't produce the kind of anxiety that Paul faced. And yet, Paul seemed to have the ability to ride above the threats and the circumstances of his life. Paul said in the very beginning of his letter,
"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21)

In the verses that follow our lesson for today, Paul said that he had learned to be content with what he had whether it was a lot or a little. Paul could give thanks in all circumstances because he believed the grace of God in Jesus Christ would seem him through. (Philippians 4:12-13)

Paul was not an anxious person. For him a lack of anxiety was a matter of faith. Circumstances, reasoned Paul, should not control his life. His life should be controlled by the power and promises of God in Jesus Christ.

DON'T WORRY

And, Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to follow his example. He told them,
"Don't be anxious about anything. Don't worry. Stand firm in the Lord!"
(cf. Philippians 4:1,6)

I talked with someone about this passage a few weeks ago, and he said,
"This passage teaches us that worry is a sin. If I worry about something, if I'm anxious, I'm being disobedient to God."

I didn't say anything, but I thought to myself,
"Oh sure. Let's add guilt to our anxiety. That'll make things better!"

My friend meant well, but the cure for anxiety is a bit more complex than resolving to "just say no." But this passage does give us some specific ways that we can effectively cope with the anxiety that inevitably comes our way.

OF THE SAME MIND IN THE LORD

First, Paul told the Philippians that personal problems with other Christians need to be worked out. In verse two of our lesson, Paul talked about two women who were leaders in the church and yet were having a problem with each other. He wrote, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Philippians 4:2

We don't know why Euodia and Syntyche's were at odds with each other. But, I would be willing to guess that their fight could have been prompted by their anxiety about some problem that

faced the church. They had differing opinions about how to deal with that problem and therein lay the bone of contention.

There's a myth that "real Christians" don't fight or disagree. But, it has been my experience that often some of the hardest workers in the church have very big disagreements, even fights because they are so passionate about their faith, and they're trying to work out some anxiety producing problem together.

In fact, we learn in the book of Acts that even the apostle Paul had a tremendous argument with his long time friend and fellow missionary, Barnabas. It seems that a young colleague by the name of John Mark abandoned the group in the middle of one of their missionary journeys. Paul thought that this disqualified John Mark from any future journeys. But, Barnabas disagreed. He felt they should give the young man another chance.

So, Paul and Barnabas, two close friends who risked all for the gospel, had an angry dispute. In fact, Paul and Barnabas became so angry that they parted company and went in different directions. Barnabas took young John Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas with him to Syria and Cilicia. (Acts 15:37-39)

If something like this could happen to two of the greatest Christian missionaries who ever lived, how can we think that conflict and the anxiety it breeds will magically be eliminated in our churches today? People who have strong beliefs will often have strong arguments as well. The key is how we deal with those arguments.

I wonder if this dispute might have been on Paul's mind as he implored these two women to "be of the same mind in the Lord." That last phrase, "be of the same mind in the Lord" is the key. I believe the apostle was asking these women to try and put what they thought was right on the back burner as they sought God's will together. And that's the key for us as well.

Much of our anxiety comes from being focused only on what we think is right and good. And when we don't get what we want, we become upset. Somehow we need to remember what we say in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done, thy kingdom come." Saying that is easy. Doing it ... being willing to wait for God's leading in real life situations is not so easy.

But, it can be done. And Paul's letter gives us some practical suggestions to use in situations like this. He asks the other members of the congregation to help these women in their disagreement.

Helping is not whispering to anyone who will listen, "Did you know that Euodia and Synthyche and not speaking to each other?" Indeed, since this was a letter written to the entire church at Philippi, the conflict between these two is placed out in the open and in a larger context the context of working for God's kingdom. In that context, the mind of Christ becomes much more important than the personal preferences of two people.

Are any of our problems really so great that we can't work them out for the sake of the kingdom? I think not. Even those problems that may seem insurmountable.

So, the first cure for anxiety is in so far as it's possible ... to take care of problems with others in a positive way. How many problems could be solved if only we could agree to just leave them in God's hands and be willing to wait for God's solution? Almost all of them.

WORSHIP

The second cure for anxiety that I find in this passage is the cure of worship. In verses 4 and 5 of our lesson Paul writes,

[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Philippians 4:4-5 (NRSV)

There is something about heartfelt worship which disarms an anxious and aggressive spirit. Indeed, there's a connection between being able to worship and our relationship with others. Jesus once said,

[23] So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24 (NRSV)

Getting right with our neighbor makes it possible for us to worship.

And I think the converse is true as well. Worshipping God enables us to get right with our neighbor. If we focus on worshipping God, if we rejoice in the Lord ... again and again somehow the concerns of this world do not seem so important.

It's like the song, Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of his wonder and grace."

The conflicts and anxiety producing events of this world do not hold a candle to the wonder of God's grace.

This is an area where the folks who prefer the more modern praise and worship style of music may have it right. When I first experienced that style of worship, my reaction was negative. Too repetitive. The theology is too shallow.

But, my viewpoint has changed.

Jesus said that we should love the Lord our God with all your heart, soul and mind. (Matthew 22:37) Being a good Calvinist I got the mind part right. But, as I look back upon my life, I realize that I might have been lacking in the heart and soul department. In addition to having a mind for God's truth, we also need a heart for God's presence.

Maybe simple phrases of praise can be a way of focusing us on that most important part of worship. As Paul put it,

[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philip. 4:4 (NRSV)

So we have two ways to combat anxiety leaving our personal problems in God's hands and filling our life with the joy of worshipping God.

GENTLENESS

The third way of combating anxiety is found in verse 5 of our lesson. Paul said,
[5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Philip. 4:5 (NRSV)

Some of us, myself included have a problem managing our anger.

Remember when I laid on the horn when the truck pulled around me this past week? Not the right thing to do. That was not a gentle response.

More than that, it was not a response that decreased the anxiety I was feeling. It increased it!

Quite often we hear the old saying, "I don't get mad. I just get even!" But, that's not true. When we try to get even, we get mad and anxious ... and a lot of other emotions that we don't want.

We believe the Lord is near ... near in presence and perhaps near in time when He will come again. Who knows?

What we do know is that our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. God is our rock and our salvation, and therefore, we need not be overly concerned about getting even.

Instead, our trust in God enables us to be gentle with others. Actually, the word translated "gentleness" means literally "appropriate" and by implication means "gentle, patient, and with moderation."

We quite often make ourselves anxious by responding to a problem in a way that is not appropriate. We blow the problem out of proportion. We are not patient. Our response is not measured and moderate.

The gentle person patiently takes all factors into consideration and then responds out of strength instead of weakness. If I believe the Lord is near, I do not have to constantly defend myself or worry about what will happen. I can be gentle.

PRAYER WITH THANKSGIVING

Now we're up to three ways to combat anxiety. Trust God to solve our personal problems, fill our lives with worship, respond to provocation in a gentle way and now ... what I think is the ultimate cure for anxiety ... prayer.

But, I'm not talking about just any kind of prayer. I'm talking about prayer that is focused in a certain way. How we pray and what we pray is very important. Lots of folks talk about prayer being the answer, but Paul asks the Philippians to pray a certain way in an anxious time.

In fact, if you've got a lot of anxiety in your life, it might be a good idea for you to memorize Philippians 4:6-7.

I know. People don't memorize Scripture these days. But, perhaps they should. Especially these verses.

You see, if you can put these verses in your mind, they can be with all through the day when anxious situations occur, and you can actually put them into practice.

Let's read them again. Paul wrote,

[6] Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

[7] And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philip. 4:6-7 (NIV)

There are two parts to this prayer. First, you petition God, that is you present your requests to God. And second, you present those requests with thanksgiving. That second part is the one we most often leave out, but it is very important if we are to overcome anxiety.

THANKSGIVING SERVICE

Some of our church members from Trinidad and Tobago have an interesting worship service every year in their homes. It's a thanksgiving service, and they invite all their friends to their home to eat a meal and give thanks for the blessings of the past year. Usually it is held in late September or October. And, being a ceremony that originated out of India's culture, there are always people there who belong to another faith usually Muslim and Hindu.

Two years ago the service was held right after the events of September 11. Though it was a thanksgiving service, it was hard to give thanks under those circumstances. Indeed, I wondered out loud if some of those present might be the victims of prejudice because of their faith and offered my support in that regard.

But, we gave thanks and had a meal. It seemed to help.

This year I held another service, and I used as my text Philippians 4:6-7. I reminded everyone of what was going on last year at this time of the uncertainty we all felt, the fears about war and what would happen next.

And I said that we still have many things to be anxious about a plunging stock market, the threat of war with Iraq and so on.

But, then I also said,
"But, despite all that, we have a great many things about which we can be thankful. We did make it through the year without any more major problems. Despite an economic down turn and corporate scandal, we continue to have a strong economy and a strong country. God has blessed us in this last year, and we have many reasons to give thanks."

We again gave thanks and had a meal together. It was once again a great blessing.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

What I talked about on a national level is also true on a personal level as well. You may have had setbacks in the past year, but in what ways has God answered your prayers? What blessings do you have in your life right now? For whom and for what do you give thanks?

This might be a good way to think about praying.

For every petition, for every thing that you ask from God, try to find something else for which you can give thanks. It's like that old song that we sing at Thanksgiving sometimes, "Count Your Blessings."

I know of no better cure for anxiety than to count your blessings, to appreciate and give thanks to God for all the good things in your life.

Paul puts it another way in verse 8 our lesson for today. He wrote,

[8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Philip. 4:8 (NIV)

In other words, focus upon the positive.
Fill your mind with thoughts of God's blessings and the good things and good people that God has brought into your world.

A while back somebody said, "You are what you eat."
In other words, what we become physically is related to our diet.

That's true spiritually as well. We are what we think.
We need to be very careful about our self talk because quite often negative self talk can lead to poor mental and spiritual health.

Friends, I know that all of our lives are filled with anxiety about many things. All of us here today have very real problems with which we must deal.
But, let us encourage one another to give thanks for the good things in our lives.
Let us help one another count our blessings as well as asking God for help.

When we do that, I believe the words of the apostle Paul will be true for us as well,
the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard our hearts and our lives in Christ Jesus. And that is a welcome word for an anxious people.

Amen.