

Acts 10:44-48

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Psalm 98 (UMH 818)

1 John 5:1-6

¹Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ⁶This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

John 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Charles Wesley wrote something like six thousand hymns during his lifetime. He spent much of his life traveling from church to church on horseback, so you might wonder how he managed to do it. A part of it was because he was naturally gifted -- poetry welled up in him, allowing him to express his faith through hymns. Another reason is that he organized himself for his task. He developed a kind of shorthand so that he could quickly write down ideas as they came to him. He carried note cards in his pocket so that he could record his thoughts even while riding a horse. When he reached his destination, he would transform his rough notes into finished verse.

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" is one of Wesley's greatest hymns. The hymn is really a prayer -- a prayer to Jesus, who is "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." The hymn invites Jesus to make his dwelling in us -- to visit us with his salvation -- to enter our hearts. It invites him to take away our love of sinning -- to set our hearts at liberty. It concludes by asking Jesus to finish his new creation (we are his new creation) so that we might be pure and spotless -- perfectly restored -- ready for heaven.

When we sing this hymn as our closing hymn, keep in mind that it is a prayer -- that you are asking God to dwell in you -- to visit you with his salvation -- to enter your heart.

Friends and Lovers

This week's Gospel reading from John is all about friends and lovers. The setting for this passage is the evening before Jesus is crucified, the evening of the Last Supper. After the supper, Jesus speaks to the assembled disciples to give them his final instructions for them. He tells them to love each other as He has loved them, and as God has loved Him. He tells them that they are his friends - that they have been chosen by Him. He then tells them to extend their love and friendship to other people - and in that way they can show their love and friendship toward Jesus and God.

Jesus showed his love and friendship toward the disciples by his actions and his words. Oftentimes, love and friendship can be difficult. And certainly, being a parent is often difficult. I read a story by the writer Dick Donovan, that illustrates the point very well.

How does a father love a son? I have been a son and I am a father, so I have an idea how a father loves a son. My father's love for me was imperfect and my love for my son is imperfect, but perhaps they will shed at least a small light on how a father loves a son.

I remember an incident from my college years. My roommate and I had befriended a young man who repaid us by stealing our clothes and other things while we were in class. It was a pitiful theft, because we didn't have much worth stealing -- but he stole it anyway and left us in a bind. We needed to replace the things he had stolen, but had no money.

My father wasn't in much better shape financially than I was. He was trying to start a business, and was struggling to make ends meet. Still, when he heard of my situation, he took me to a clothing store and told me to buy what I needed. I knew that he couldn't afford to do that, so I tried not to be extravagant. Nevertheless, the things that I bought cost him dearly. I have always thought of that as an example of a father loving his son.

I had a chance to pass that on. My son's first year of college was tough. His high school had not prepared him well. His dorm was marginal. One of his roommates was a pain. Being away from home for the first time wasn't as wonderful as he had envisioned.

Whenever he sounded discouraged, I would get in my car and go to visit him. I would take him to lunch. We would sit for hours. Sometimes I would listen. Sometimes I would encourage. It seemed to help. After that first year, he moved to a new dorm and got a new roommate. From there on he was fine.

Those weren't easy trips for me. I was overextended in my work and struggling financially. Each trip cost me precious time and money. If someone had offered to pay me to make that trip for someone else's son, I would have said, "Look! I would love to help, but I just can't. There are lots of helping professionals there. Find one who doesn't have to drive so far."

But I never said that to my son. I never gave him a clue that I couldn't afford the time or the money. I did what I could. Those trips were the expression of my love.

*But I am sure that God the Father loved Jesus the Son even more than I loved my son. And Jesus says, "**As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.**" Jesus loves us a lot!*

Love needs to be expressed in tangible ways. It wasn't enough for me to feel sorry for my son. I had to get in the car and visit him. I had to listen. I had to encourage. He needed to see that he was loved. He needed that love to have a face. He needed to know that he was important!

Do you know someone like that? Someone that shows their love and friendship by their actions? I hope you have had the fortune of having a friend, or a parent, or a spouse, or a child like that. I know that I have had the fortune to have just that kind of love and friendship in my life - as exemplified by many people. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, says:

When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren.

When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too, were made ready to forgive our brethren.

What God did to us, we then owed to others.

The more we received, the more we were able to give;

and the more meager our brotherly love, the less were we living by God's mercy and love.

Thus God himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ.

A different type of friendship is found in the story of Bill and Ned:

Bill and Ned walk into a fast food joint one afternoon to get lunch. Bill orders and the cashier gives him his meal. Ned goes up to order and the cashier greets him with *"Hello Ned! How are you? Hey everybody! Ned's here!"* Everybody in the restaurant comes up and says hello to Ned. After everyone has greeted him, Bill and Ned sit down and begin to eat.

"Ned, you're pretty popular!" says Bill. *"I'm the most popular man in the world,"* says Ned. *"Now Ned,"* says Bill, *"your pretty popular but you're not the most popular man in the world."* *"Oh yeah,"* Ned replies *"I'll bet you a thousand dollars that I'm friends with anybody you can name!"* *"That so?"* answers Bill, *"How about the president of the United States?"* *"Let's go!"* says Ned.

The two fly to Washington and knock on the front door of the White House. The president answers, *"Ned! How are you doing? I haven't seen you in ages!"* The three go play a round of golf and then leave. *"That was luck!"* says Bill, *"Two thousand dollars says your not friends with the Queen of England!"* *"Let's go!"* says Ned.

The two fly to Buckingham Palace and, sure enough, are greeted by the Queen. *"Hello Ned my boy! What have you been up to these days?"* They enter the palace and have some tea and leave. Frustrated, Bill says, *"Double or nothing, you don't know the Pope!"* *"The Pope!"* says Ned, *"Let's go!"*

When they get to the Vatican, Ned instructs Bill to wait outside and Ned will come out on the balcony with his arm around the Pope. After a while, a crowd gathers to hear the Pope speak. And as told by Ned, when the Pope came out, Ned's arm was wrapped around him. Ned looks down from the balcony and see's Bill passed out on the ground. He rushes down and wakes him up.

"Bill! Bill! Wake up!" Bill opens his eyes and says, *"Ned. You're the most popular man in the world."* *"I told you that, Bill,"* says Ned, *"but you didn't faint when I knew the President! You didn't faint when I knew the Queen!"*

"Well I was shocked that you knew the Pope," says Bill. *"But I just couldn't take it when the guy next to me tapped me on the shoulder and said "Who's that up there with Ned?"*

I'm not sure I would like to have a friend like Ned. But, at least you would get to meet a bunch of famous people.

Have you ever thought about the company you keep? Who you hang out with? The people you associate with? Most of us don't. Parents did or do when they are raising teenagers. Who you are associated with, who you're friends are, sometimes says a lot about who you are. Sometimes, who you choose as friends says a lot about your own reputation.

Two 6 year old boys were attending religious school and giving the teachers problems. The teachers had tried everything to make them behave - time outs, notes home, missed recesses - but could do nothing with them. Finally the boys were sent to see the priest.

The first boy went in and sat in a chair across the desk from the priest. The priest asked, "Do you know where God is?" The little boy just sat there.

The priest stood up and asked again, "Son, do you know where God is?" The little boy trembled, but said nothing.

The priest leaned across the desk and again asked, "Do you know where God is?"

The little boy bolted out of the chair ran past his friend in the waiting room, all the way home. He got in bed and pulled the covers up over his head. His friend had followed him home and asked, "what happened in there?"

The boy replied, "God is missing and they think we did it!"

This morning's scripture is a wonderful reminder. It reminds us that God is the initiator of our relationship. It's God who chose us, not the other way around. From the beginning of time God chose us. From the moment of our conception - our birth, God chose us. In sending His Son, Jesus, into the world - God chose us.

And from the beginning of time, God has been whispering that choice in our ear. God has been quietly singing that choice to us in a love song that speaks quietly to our heart. It's verses can be seen and heard in the smile of a child and a beautiful sunrise. It can be seen and heard in the chorus of a familiar hymn or the weeping of loved one at a funeral.

All of those things are designed to lead us to say "Yes" to God's choice and say "Yes" to God. But from the beginning of time, God has chosen us. And this passage tells us that we are Chosen to love, chosen as a friend, chosen and appointed.

This type of love is quite different from that of our culture -- a culture that too often understands love as the satisfaction of *my* needs rather than as satisfying the needs of another. The person who says, "*I love you,*" may mean only "*I want you*" and may even

resort to manipulation to possess you. How different that is from the person who is ready to give of themselves in behalf of the other person -- to even quietly walk away if that is the best way to meet the other person's needs. To understand the love which Jesus speaks of, it helps to understand how we commonly think about the word love.

The late Frank Harrington who served the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta for many years told the story of Richard Ballenger, who was seven years old in 1980. His mother was busy and asked Richard to shine her Sunday shoes so that she could wear them on Christmas Day. He shined her shoes, and his mother gave him a quarter as a reward.

On Christmas morning, when the mother put on her Sunday shoes, she found a lump in one of the shoes. She turned the shoe upside down, and a little package wrapped in paper fell out. She opened the paper and found her quarter enclosed. On the paper, in his childish scrawl, Richard had written, "*I done it for love.*"

The author C.S. Lewis has some important thoughts on loving others. He says:

As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets.

When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love him.

If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more.

If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.

There is an important lesson in today's scripture. God chooses whom God chooses. God empowers whom God empowers. A quick look around most churches shows that God does not necessarily choose the most talented. I certainly fall into the category of "not the most talented."

Most Godly work is done by ordinary people distinguished by only one characteristic -- they have given God their heart. That should encourage us. It encourages me. It should also make us hesitant to judge another person's potential. The star athlete and the class valedictorian might be too full of themselves to be much heavenly good. But the person who seems to have the least to offer might be the person that God chooses to transform the world. Think of that when you see some one that doesn't seem to have much going for them. God chooses whom God chooses.

Rev. Billy D. Strayhorn tells this story: *Mahalia Jackson was one of the premiere singers of all time. For ten years she sang with Tommy Dorsey. And then started recording on her own. She sang jazz and pop tunes but her greatest love was singing Gospel. There's probably no greater renditions of "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" and "He's Got the Whole*

World In His Hand" than those done by Mahalia Jackson.

After a concert in Tokyo, Mahalia Jackson was introduced to the Emperor of Japan. The Emperor commented on Ms. Jackson's extraordinary voice. She in turn replied, "I can take you to over 200 of my people who have better voices. But one day God reached down his big hand and said, 'Mahalia, baby, I chooses you.'"

Jesus says, **"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete"** (v. 11).

Jesus is not calling us to dreary, boring, lock-step obedience - but to joy. *"The joy of Jesus is the joy that arises from the sense of a finished work. It is creative joy, like the joy of the artist. It produces a sense of unexhausted power for fresh creation"* It is not the empty joy of luxurious surroundings and sated appetites -- joy that evaporates as soon as things change. It is, instead, the joy of the disciplined life, like the joy of the athlete who rejoices after conquering a difficult challenge to win the race. That athlete might be dead tired, have blistered feet, and aching muscles, but that pain matters little while experiencing the joy of victory. Victory in Jesus.
Amen.