

The Friends We Do Not Choose
Acts 10:44-48
John 15:9-17

“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

No offense, but if I were left to my own devices, I likely would not be friends with you—and if left to your own devices, you likely would not be friends with me. By definition and design, the church is an *unlikely* (sometimes even an *unlikely*!) gathering of people who have only one thing in common: God has called each of us out of ourselves and into Christian community through God’s Word to us in Jesus Christ. *Jesus* is the one who calls us friends if we do what he commands: if we love one another as he has loved us. *Jesus* chose us, we did not choose him, that we may love one another.

After last Saturday night, who else should I quote in support of this truth but Dietrich Bonhoeffer? “We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ,” Bonhoeffer said this of the church to a class of seminarians. From eternity we have been chosen in him and have been given to each other in time by him to be the church. Still, we act in time as if we are the ones doing the choosing. Then we judge the church God has given us against our ideal of what a Christian community “should be” or what kind of people “should” belong or what members “should” believe or do or look like. When we love our “dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself,” Bonhoeffer says, “[we] become destroyers of that Christian community even though [our] personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.”

Nadia Bolz-Weber, the tattooed Lutheran pastor of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver tells about the Sunday when her quirky congregation doubled in size and then continued to grow because of a feature story on the church in the *Denver Post*. “We knew that given the exposure there would be some looky-loos—people just seeing what HFASS was about, out of curiosity—but what we didn’t realize was that they were going to stay, and that they wouldn’t look like us. I wanted ‘us’ to be bigger. What I wasn’t prepared for was the ‘us’ to be different. “*My people*’ don’t read the paper,” she goes on. “We get our news online or from NPR. Who does read the paper are fifty-year-olds from the suburbs and...that’s mostly who showed up. *It was awful*...I was terrified that the edgy, marginalized people whom we had always attracted would now come and see a bunch of people who looked like their parents and think, ‘This isn’t for me.’”

Because we think we are the ones choosing where and how and with whom to be the church, we are nothing if not fearful and even angry when God in Christ turns out to be the one invariably choosing the last people on earth we want to be with on Sunday morning. I hate to break this news to you, but this is how Christians have reacted to the mercurial movement of God’s Spirit from the very beginning!

The first Christians were Jews who believed Jesus had been raised by God from the dead and so were baptized. Still they continued to circumcise male offspring, follow dietary laws, and live in obedience to Torah even as they confessed Jesus as Lord and celebrated Christ’s resurrection on the first day of the week. They could have continued as a Christian sect of Jews only but for the fact that God’s Spirit inexplicably began falling upon Gentiles. Unclean, impure gentiles. Or as we might put it today given our national embrace of politically incorrect speech, filthy, stinking Gentiles.

The details of this turn in the road are as follows. First God’s Spirit visits a Roman soldier and God-fearer, a Gentile believer in the God of Abraham named Cornelius. The Spirit tells Cornelius to send for Peter. Simultaneously, Peter has this wild dream in which animals that do not belong together are mixing it up on a sheet. A voice says, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter says he has never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice says, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

A knock at the door by Cornelius’ men wakes Peter from the dream and the Spirit orders him to go with them. The next day Peter and six members of the church depart. When Peter arrives at Cornelius’ home, Peter suddenly gets that the dream was not about unclean food but about unclean people. God is doing the choosing! He enters the house and says, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Cornelius tells Peter they are there to listen to all that the Lord has commanded Peter to say. So Peter begins to preach and,

in the middle of his sermon, right where our reading for today begins, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who hear the word. The six “circumcised believers” cannot believe the Holy Spirit is falling on “*even* on the Gentiles.” “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Peter asks. And he baptizes the lot!

By the time the seven return to Jerusalem, the council knew all about this irregularity. They *said* they were angry because the circumcised ate with the uncircumcised, but they actually were enraged at Peter for baptizing those filthy, stinking Gentiles. Just like Nadia and her inclusive congregation were irritated that suburbanites in Dockers had invaded their counter-cultural congregation, just like white Presbyterians in South Carolina were murderously incensed when their minister invited black Presbyterians to worship with them, just like straight Presbyterians all over the church left this denomination after the Spirit called LGBTQ Presbyterians into leadership through the voice of the church, so the Jerusalem Council thought they were the ones doing the choosing.

Mind my words: the Spirit’s greatest challenges in any age are loosening the church’s grip on the way things have been to receive God’s future and opening insiders hearts to welcome the outsider. Nadia scheduled a meeting for the church to talk about the “sudden growth and demographic changes.” The secret plan was that the people with tattoos and addictions, the drag queens and transgendered kids would “say who they were and what the church had always been about, [so that] the new people who really didn’t belong would self-select out, realizing it was not really meant for them.” Just before the meeting Nadia called a colleague who said to her, “You guys are really good at ‘welcoming the stranger’ when it’s a young transgendered person. But sometimes ‘the stranger’ looks like your mom or dad.” She was furious and wanted to hang up except she could feel “actual blood and love pumping through [her] body for what felt like the first time in weeks.... Without anesthesia or a sterile environment,” she said, “God reached in, ripped out my heart of stone, and replaced it with a heart of flesh.” When the day of the meeting arrived, a 73 year-old Episcopal deacon said that she knew she was a bit older than most but that this was the place she could pray and be herself. A Brownie leader who had been driving forty-five minutes from the suburbs said she wasn’t sure she fit in the church but she knew the drive was worth it to feel as close to God as she did in the liturgy. Then Asher spoke up. “As the young transgendered kid who was welcomed into this community, I just want to go on the record and say that I’m really glad there are people at church now who look like my mom and dad. Because I have a relationship with them that I just can’t with my own mom and dad.”

“It goes without saying,” Nadia concludes, “that the House for All Sinners and Saints is stronger now because of these newcomers. You can look around at the 120 or so people gathered on any given Sunday and think *I am unclear what all these people have in common*. Out of the corner of your eye there’s a homeless guy serving communion to a corporate lawyer and out of the other corner is a teenage girl with pink hair holding the baby of a suburban soccer mom. And there I was a year ago fearing that the weird-ness of our church was going to be diluted.”

“The Holy Spirit had fallen on them just as it had on us at the beginning,” Peter testified. “If God gave them the same gift [God] gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” The council was silenced. This is the story of two conversions, two changes of heart, two peoples who would never choose each other unless they were chosen by God in Christ to be the church.

“Christian community is not an ideal *we* have to realize,” Bonhoeffer concluded, “but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community[’s future] and pray and hope for it.” It suddenly struck me that Bonhoeffer’s words were addressed not to members of the church but to preachers like Nadia and me. Thanks be to God!