

DID I NOT CHOOSE YOU, THE TWELVE?

Sermon by the Rev. Richard S. McDermott
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 Fort Collins, Colorado
 PLEASE READ: I Peter 2:4-10; John 6:63-71

Watching the 2008 Summer Olympics over the weekend gave me the sense of witnessing an amazing historical event. The Opening Ceremonies were stunning in their scope and beauty, and reminded me of the long and storied history of the host country, China. The athletes are incredible, already setting several new world and Olympic records, and achieving milestones only imagined by previous generations. The Olympic ideal is on display with 204 nations and 11,000 athletes competing peacefully in games that measure both individual and team achievement. People will look back on this time and will agree that this is an historic Olympics.

Just one week ago today, another important chapter in history ended. One of the most courageous Christians of our time, and perhaps in history, passed away at the age of 89 without much fanfare. His name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and he was, perhaps, the greatest writer of the twentieth century. He spent 8 years in the Siberian gulag under Stalin, and secretly wrote about the horrors of the Soviet labor camps. His works were published first in France, books like *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *The First Circle* and later, his multi-volume history called, *The Gulag Archipelago*, describing how tens of millions perished under Stalin. Alexander's life, and the life of his family was threatened repeatedly. In 1974 he was exiled from Russia and lived in the U.S. before being allowed to return 20 years later. In 1978 he gave a famous address at Harvard, calling the West to a renewed courage, to return to its Christian roots, and to seek a new "spiritual blaze." Solzhenitsyn used to quote a Russian proverb: "One word of truth can move the world," and his millions of words of truth indeed moved both East and West. He was critical of the abuses of capitalism as well as the failures of communism. He warned both his own country and the West of what happens to societies when "we forget God."

There is no question that his Harvard remarks remain relevant even thirty years later. Much like our European friends, we continue the slide toward forgetting God, and many of us apparently lack the courage to try to change it. Words about God continue to be suppressed in many places, including some of our universities, our schools and in the public square. Even within the church, in some sectors, codes are arising that stifle faithful theological discussion. And it is far easier to simply remain quiet than to incur the wrath of our more secular humanist colleagues and friends. Alexander Solzhenitsyn survived the beatings and the threats of his oppressors by knowing that there was a higher authority to whom we will all answer. His faith in Jesus Christ sustained him in some of the darkest hours of his captivity. But I wonder: would our faith in Jesus do the same for us? Or does our faith need some deepening?

I have had an unusual number of conversations recently with people who admit they are angry with God. In some instances, they have lost loved ones, and feel lonely and bereft without them. They wonder why God couldn't do something. In other instances they have not had things go their way with life and work, and are frustrated and depressed about that. They wonder why God didn't act on their behalf. Others were expecting some great things to happen and they didn't.

And God doesn't seem to be helping them with their plans. In each instance, the expectations of God differ slightly, but all had wished for a different outcome.

In today's sermon I want to remind us that life is a bit like being chosen to be a part of an Olympic team. It is an incredible honor to be a part of that team, and there is a chance that your team will win a bronze, silver, or even gold medal. But there is a much greater likelihood that some difficult things will happen, and there won't be any medals at all. There will only be the courage you showed in competing, the integrity you had in giving it your best, and the faith that you had in your coach or your leader. There is always the temptation to blame the coach when things don't go as you hoped for. But in most instances, you would never have made it this far without the coach.

Today we will look at how the people gathered in this room, and all over the world, have been given the incredible privilege of knowing the good news that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the universe and is our Savior from the power of sin and death. And we are not just invited to hear one of his press conferences, or hear other people talk about him. We are invited to have a personal relationship with Him by faith! We have been chosen to be a part of his band of followers. As we come to actually know Jesus through prayer, through our reading of Scripture, in the power of His Holy Spirit, and in the fellowship of his Body, the Church, then we can begin to understand that Jesus cares for us in the good times and the bad times, when we're joyous and when we are suffering, when we are healthy and when we are sick. No matter what our circumstances, Jesus will be there to listen and to walk with us because he knows what we are going through.

In our lesson from John's gospel today, we see a number of people who were following Jesus, who knew him fairly well, nevertheless stopped believing in him, and turned back and no longer went about with him. We are given the impression that two things may have caused this re-evaluation by this group of disciples. First was his teaching, from the previous paragraph, that the bread that he gives for the life of the world is his flesh, that his disciples must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have life, and that his words are spirit and life. Verse 60 in John 6, which we did not read today, has the disciples saying, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" The second thing that may have caused some disciples to re-evaluate was the sense that Jesus was headed for trouble with the religious authorities. Perhaps they could see that suffering was in his future, and they did not want to go there. But once again we see that the great divide among the would-be followers of Jesus and those who did follow was belief.

We read in verse 64, Jesus said, "But among you are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'" Now, isn't that fascinating. Jesus invites all these people, many more than the twelve, to be his followers or disciples. And many do follow. But when the going gets tough, several quit believing and take off, but Jesus knew from the beginning that they would do this. The question is raised, if he did know, why did he invite them in the first place? And even more dramatic than that, Jesus later says, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." And it goes on to explain that he was speaking about Judas, the one who would betray

him. The same question is raised: if Jesus knew Judas was being influenced by the devil, why did he choose him to be one of his twelve closest disciples?

I think that Jesus is showing us how we are to extend his ministry. Even those we know are unlikely to respond can still be given the invitation to follow Jesus. We should remember that the devil also shows up in church. Have you ever been offended by another member of the church, and are you unreconciled to that person as a result? Satan is at work. You need to make peace with that person. The progress of the gospel depends on it. Do you secretly despise people from other church traditions, or who prefer a different worship style? Beware of that attitude. That is the fruit of satanic strategy. A little girl once asked her neighborhood friend whether she could attend church with her on Sunday. The second girl said she would have to ask her mother. After she did this, she replied to her friend, “Mommy said I can’t go to church with you, because we belong to different abominations.” No kidding! Sometimes if denominations simply divide us from one another, they can be abominations! The evil one wants to divide Christians one from another, and we should resist that.

Jesus got a bit more serious with the twelve, when he asks, “Do you also wish to go away?” Once again, Simon Peter is the one to answer him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Then Jesus reminds Peter that Jesus himself chose the twelve, including Judas. Do you know that Jesus has chosen you? Later in John 15, Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” Now, we tend to think about pastors “hearing the call,” being chosen and entering the ministry. But have you thought about your calling, that you are chosen, and that you have a ministry as well? What does it mean to be “chosen”?

If you know Jesus then you know that he has not only touched you and called you but he has also chosen you, not only for salvation, but also for service. People sometimes joke about Presbyterians being the “frozen chosen.” I guess that’s because we believe that the Lord chooses us as people and that we tend not to be too demonstrative in our worship. But to be chosen is not to be elevated above others. We are chosen to be disciples who are saved, but our discipleship involves service and sometimes, suffering. So being chosen is both a great privilege and a great responsibility. As we learn to receive God’s grace by faith, we go forth to serve in a right or justified relationship with the Lord. We become ambassadors for Christ who are on the move, so maybe we should be called, “the mosin’ chosen” because we are on the move for the Lord.

Jesus himself, of course was chosen. I Peter says, “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.” It later calls Jesus, “...a cornerstone chosen and precious....” This letter was written to mostly Gentiles, who knew little about Jewish traditions, and about the Jewish law, and how the Jews are God’s “chosen people” who were blessed to be a blessing to the world. And here is what Peter says to these Gentiles: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

You see, the only thing different about these Gentiles is that they now believed in Jesus Christ! That is all it takes. Jesus became the Savior and Lord of their lives, and became their friend and their Master. They now submitted their entire lives to Jesus, and that is how we know today that both they and we are now a people chosen by the Lord.

Friends, are you ready to respond to the call of God? He has chosen you. Are you listening to his instructions? The call is being issued. Do you know that the task before us is much bigger than any Olympic games in history? But we must live and serve as a team, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, set apart for God's purposes, because you are God's own people. Will you have the courage of a Solzhenitsyn, or the faith of the Apostle Peter? Can you give your life anew to Jesus and say to him, "Lord to whom shall we go...you have the words of eternal life."