

GOSPEL LESSON: *John 15:9-17*

- 9** “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
- 10** If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.
- 11** I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
- 12** My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
- 13** Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.
- 14** You are my friends if you do what I command.
- 15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.
- 16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.
- 17** This is my command: Love each other.”

MAUNDY THURSDAY JOHN 15:9-17
SALEM EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH, MILWAUKEE, WI

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Dear fellow redeemed and fellow chosen:

Do you remember back in grade school? Remember physical education and you lined up with your classmates? Remember, as two of you classmates would choose teams, picking one person at a time until everyone was chosen? When were you selected? Were you one of the first selected or were you one of the last?

Believe it or not, I was rarely the first one chosen on any team in physical education. In fact, the only time I was chosen first was when I was chosen as a captain and got to pick others. Otherwise, I was chosen last. Almost without fail. There I'd stand, waiting and hoping, then at the end one captain would say, "We'll take so-and-so; you can have John." Now, if you also suffered such humiliation, I'm sure that you would agree that you didn't feel wanted; in fact, they probably wished you came down with the flu just so that you wouldn't have to participate and thus be a part of their team.

Well, guess what? There's no need to feel that way anymore! Not only that, but we have been chosen by God himself! God chose us to be on His team! God chose us to be part of His family! God chose us to live eternally with Him! God chose to dwell with us here on earth! Tonight we hear Jesus tell us: **I Chose You.** *He chose us because we were unable to do anything on our own. And He chose us to bear fruit that will last.*

Tonight's text comes from one of Jesus' "I Am" statements that we find in John's Gospel. There are 11 such statements found in John's Gospel, three of them uttered on Maundy Thursday. This is the third "I Am" statement that Jesus speaks on Maundy Thursday—"I Am the Vine, you are the branches." The verses that form our text this evening show us another façade in the dynamics of the vine and its branches—the branches need the vine to survive, while the vine can live without the branches. Obviously it is the vine that even gives life to the branches. And while branches can be grafted onto a vine, the branch cannot graft itself.

"I Chose You" Jesus says. Just what does that mean? What did it mean when Jesus said it to his disciples? Did that mean that the disciples were such good, Law-abiding Jews that they deserved to be followers? Were they from good families and thus entitled to be Jesus' followers?

Looking at the backgrounds of the disciples we see that it wasn't background or education. Many were fishermen. They spoke like Galileans, which meant that people in Judea considered them from the backwoods. They were fishermen, tax collectors, and common laborers.

The lives of these disciples were not exemplary either. There was Simon the Zealot who thought nothing of violence to free Judea from Roman rule. On the flip side, Matthew collected taxes for the Roman government. It was common knowledge that tax collectors not only collected what the government wanted, but extorted the people besides into paying more. Simon Peter would have great faith one minute, then say something really ungodly the next. On Maundy Thursday night he even denied knowing Jesus! James and John wanted to call down fire and brimstone on a village that did not welcome the disciples.

Now, many of us might not see ourselves as privileged either. I doubt that many of us think we've been born with a silver spoon in our mouths; in fact, for many of us our upbringing was far from ideal. But do we sometimes feel that we deserved to be Christians? Do we point to our sterling church attendance record? Do we take pride that we know so much of what's *in* the Bible? Do we speak with pride about overcoming our addictions, our pains, and our temptations and thus, for our efforts, we deserve to be Christians?

Then we need to remember Jesus' words: "*I am the vine, you are the branches...I chose you.*" Jesus chose us. Jesus chose us before we even knew who he was or what He did. In fact, we still may not comprehend fully what He did. As Paul said, we were dead in trespasses and sins. Dead people can do nothing; spiritually dead we also can do nothing. As a branch, we lay on the ground withering and drying. We couldn't graft ourselves onto the branch; only God could graft us onto the branch.

I Chose You Jesus said. He chose us to bear fruit—fruit that will last! I'm sure that most of you have had and taken care of a plant at one time. What happens when a branch on that plant breaks off? Well, if you don't graft it back in right away, it dries up and dies. The plant keeps on living; the branch dies. And, as long as the branch is still attached to that vine, it bears fruit. The fruit may differ—some fruit is edible, some are flowers, and some branches may just bear fruit by gathering sunlight to feed the fruit underground. But a branch attached to the vine bears fruit. That is part of the natural order of the universe.

Jesus also chose us to bear fruit that will last. What form wills that fruit take? Basically, love. You see, Jesus chose us to be branches on Him, the vine. He chose us so that He can live through us and work through us. He works through us to keep God's law. And that law can be summed up in two sentences:

*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all you mind, and
Love your neighbor as yourself.*

He had to love us before we could love Him. He had to love us before we could love each other. It is only when we feel Jesus' love and know it personally and by experience can we love Him or love each other—loving with a self-sacrificing love.

And how did Jesus demonstrate His love? Tomorrow we observe Good Friday. On Good Friday we watch as Jesus, seen as innocent by the courts, nevertheless is put to death on a cross. He was whipped and beaten before he was nailed to the cross. On the cross each breath was agony. Then He died to pay for our sins. He died so that you and I now have life. He suffered so that we could enjoy the luxuries of heaven. He did this because He loved us. He loved us so much that he created each and every one individually. He loved us so much that He died for each one us, paying for every last sin in our life. He loved us so much that He chose us and He chose to be with us. In a few moments we will again celebrate the Lord's Supper which He instituted on that first Maundy Thursday. It is a tangible reminder that He loves us so much He chooses to be with us to the point of entering us with His body and blood.

We often have opportunity to display His love to others. We may not know that we are producing fruit at the moment—taking time to hear a friend's concerns and giving comfort from God's Word, even if we don't quite know how the Bible passage goes or where it is in the Bible. Taking time to serve our Lord here in His house. Taking time to come on a Friday night to Grace Oasis and share your faith with someone hurting and aching and in depression over sin. Taking time to assist others in their everyday chores, for Jesus says even as you do it to the least of these, you do so unto me.

You and I are all dear children of God. He has created us; he has redeemed us with His own blood; He has sanctified us, choosing us to bear fruit that will last. You don't have to be athletic. You don't have

to be a beauty finalist. God wants you just as you are. He chose you. He wants you. He says to you, “Come to me, friend.”

Ann Landers and Dear Abby, and I’m sure other advice columnists, often answer mail about those picked last in physical education like I was or like some of you may have been. There is usually lingering trauma from such rejection. But what happens when you are picked first? When you are picked not because you have to be picked but because you are actually wanted by that team captain? Isn’t that game that much more fun? You may not have the athletic tools, and you will likely still struggle. But your attitude changes when you have been so honored.

Our theme this Lent has been **The Life Changing Themes of the Cross**. Jesus proves by His death on the cross that He wants us—He chose us! Society may say what they will about our looks, about our intelligence, about our weaknesses and addictions! Some so-called Christians may even look down at us for our lives and what they have been. But guess what? The King of kings, the Lord of the universe, He who not only can have anything He wants but actually owns all—He chose you and me to be His own. We cannot help but be changed—even if the change isn’t immediately evident. He will change us because He chose us. He chose us not because of anything in us worthy of God’s attention. But God chose us that He might display His love in us, and we in turn display it in others in fruit that will last. What better words can a sinner hear than Jesus saying: “I chose you. You are my friend.”

Amen