

Chosen

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 19, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

During the process that brought Jenny and I here to be in this wonderful place on this wonderful Sunday morning among our wonderful new family, during that process, I heard on more than one occasion that there was *some* concern among *some* folks concerning both the substance *and* length of Sunday morning sermons. I want you to know that I almost always preach on the morning's lectionary Gospel lesson, I almost always manage to see some connection between the message of the Gospel and the normally hum-drum beat of my everyday life, and (Show stopwatch) I *almost* always keep the sermon between ten and twelve minutes.

Today, however, is, of course, an exceptional Sunday morning. So, even though I generally feel that the pulpit is the wrong place to put forth points of personal privilege, I'm going to take a couple of minutes to do exactly that – just this once. That means that all y'all who were fixin' to start your timers (hold up stopwatch) – and I know there are at least a couple of you out there, because names have been named – I'll ask you not to put me on the clock just yet. I'll let you know when I get around to the preaching part.

First of all, let me add my thanks to yours to the men and women of the Search Committee for all the work they have done over too long a period. Unless you have served on one of these committees, you probably have no idea how much time and energy and dedication they have given. And my thanks to the Vestry of St. Paul's, and to Martha and Susan who have served the Parish so well as Senior Wardens.

When Jenny and I first laid our eyes on St. Paul's, driving up *in cognito* after a lunchtime conversation with Fr. Mark Linder down in Bowling Green, we had no idea whatsoever what the Lord might have in store for us. Having just experienced the inverse of the process, I am sure that many of you know what I mean when I say that such a time is at once exciting and right on the edge of plain old terrifying. But from the minute I hung up from talking to the Search Committee in a hotel room on our way back from visiting our son in Nebraska, I knew I had met friends, not strangers. For years I have counseled parishes and priests alike to avoid treating the search process as a job interview and understand it instead as a courtship. I am convinced that the relationship between a priest and a parish is about being family together and I have to say that in the weeks that followed that first conversation, I fell head over heels in love with St. Paul's, and that love has continued to grow as Jenny and I have gotten to know the parish better and better.

Since our arrival here less than week ago, we have been welcomed by absolutely everyone with whom we've come in contact, and, though we're still waiting not-so-patiently for our apartment on Powell to be readied for our use, our hearts have already found our home here on the ever-dry red banks of the Ohio.

Now (Click stopwatch) on to the preachin'.

For many people, I hear, the fondest memories of their school years are of the elysian joys of recess time. For me, though... not so much. Even seeing me today, I suppose it doesn't come as a huge surprise to any of you that when I was growing up I wasn't the biggest or the most coordinated or the most athletic boy on the playground. (I'm just not sure *how* in the world I ended up with a couple of sports loving sons, one of whom measures in at 6-foot-5.) In point of fact, from the third grade through the eighth, I generally held the decidedly dubious distinction of being the smallest boy at Sevilla Elementary School in Phoenix, Arizona, derided by boys and pitied by girls, when not just ignored by both. I can remember the day that Vincent Tarentino moved into our neighborhood, not because he and I

immediately became fast friends, but because he was the same size as me, and sometimes as we grew even just a tough *smaller*.

I suppose they have come up with some other way of doing things by now, or at least I hope they have, but back in the rough and tumble, practically unsupervised playfields of the late '60s, teams for kickball or football or soccer or basket ball or whatever pastime was popular at the moment, were formed by a couple of team captains "choosing up sides." "I pick Ricky," one of the captains would say, meaning Ricky Oldfather, the tallest kid in class who could kick the kickball clear over the fence, regardless who was "pitching." "I choose Kenny," the other captain would say, meaning Kenny Harbison who could throw the ball accurately enough to "tag" a runner just before his foot hit the base and hard enough that he would limp off the field – and think twice before *trying* to run the next time. "I pick Steve" – Steve Sandival. "I choose Arthur" – Arthur Merchant. "I choose Peter." "I pick the other Kenny." "I choose Danny."

And so it went – *every time*. That's why I have their names memorized. I would stand there in the line waiting, knowing the way the choosing was going to end: "Oh, I guess I'll take Dick." Or worse yet, "Ha! You get Dick." I *hated* that nickname! And I hated being last. I have to confess that there were times when I stood in that line and literally prayed that my friend Vince Tanrentino would be chosen last – and on the rare occasion when that actually happened, I celebrated being chosen *second* to last as triumphantly as if my name had been Ricky Oldfather. It wasn't until I was fourteen and had finally, in a single summer's growth, caught up with at least some of my peers, and had entered high school where I didn't even have to step foot onto a ball field or gym floor unless I wanted to, that I finally got over the terror of that choosing line. Instead I ran for Student Senate – and was elected. And I competed for leadership in the Junior ROTC – and was promoted to Cadet Colonel. And grades took the place of points in a game – and I graduated with a 4.0 and a scholarship to John's Hopkins University. I wasn't always first place, but I wasn't always last anymore, either.

I remember the day that Jenny and I decided to get married. We had known each other for three years, singing together in the choir at Madison Street Methodist Church, down the road a piece in Clarksville, Tennessee. I had apparently continued in less-than-blissful ignorance for much of those three years as Jenny tried one thing after another to let me know that she was interested in spending more time with me than just Wednesday evening rehearsals and Sunday morning services. Cookies in my music slot – she was just being nice. Homemade pecan pies for special occasions – she must have known I needed them. Invitations for holiday meals with her family – well, the young single lieutenant had to eat somewhere. We have often joked that her next move to get me to wake up was a 2x4 up the side of my head. Thankfully, it didn't come to that. The day I realized that she loved me, the day I realized that she had chosen me, was, and continues to be, one of the happiest moments in my life. I was number one. I was top of the heap. *Me* – I had first priority in someone's life! Eat your heart out, Ricky Oldfather.

Since then, over the twenty-eight and a half years since the day I said, "I will!" and Jenny said it right back, I have had plenty of opportunities to be chosen. From being chosen as the commander of several Army units, to being chosen to help lead the boys' Cub Scout groups, to being chosen to go to seminary and be ordained a priest, to being chosen as the brand new Rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, I have been chosen many, many times. And do you know what? I have been delighted each and every time.

I remember the day – I was thirteen – when I realized the big distinction between me loving God and God loving me. Don't get me wrong, I had been brought up in church – not the Episcopal Church but a little denomination called the Missionary Church that I've told many of you already makes the Baptists look like a bunch of liberals. From probably the second Sunday of my life (and then only because I was *born* on a Sunday morning), I was in church. I do not remember a single Sunday morning discussion as to whether or not we should go to church – it simply wasn't an issue in the Martindale house. I don't remember a single time when I asked if I could skip Youth Group – though I'm not sure if that is because

I knew what the answer would be and therefore didn't bother asking, or whether I did ask and the answer was so firm that the whole discussion has passed from my consciousness. I don't remember any of those discussions about Wednesday night prayer meeting, either. And I was in college before I saw *The Wonderful World of Disney*, because it aired on Sunday evenings – when we were in church. Church was a part of our family's life – it was a part of *my* life. I knew enough Bible verses to win several Bibles as prizes. I could recite the books of the Bible and the twelve disciples – to *music*. I knew the song *Jesus Loves Me, This I Know* by heart – *all* the verses. But one particular Sunday when I was thirteen, something was said or something was done or I felt something, that made me understand that everything that Christ did – the crown of thorns, the whipping, the cross – everything was for *me*. I realized that day that I was chosen – me and you and even Ricky Oldfather.

We were each chosen before the foundation of the universe. We were chosen before angels sang the first Alleluia. Even if it technically makes no sense at all, we were chosen before there *was* a before. We were chosen by the absolute, infinite, unquenchable, never-changing, never-failing love of God. We have been chosen to know in the core of our being the love that set a million, million stars ablaze. We have been chosen to return to its giver the love that walked the dusty road to Calvary, the love that felt the nails and the spear, the love that was shut for a moment in darkness of death's tomb. We have been chosen to absolutely *celebrate* that love as it burst from that tomb and shattered the power of sin and death forever.

And we have been chosen, you and I, to bear that love in our heart of hearts. We have been chosen to sing that love with every word we speak. We have been chosen to carry that love to others who are still mired in the thought that there is no one that cares for them. We have been chosen to share the love of Christ which has changed and charged and challenged your life and mine, with our neighbors and our friends and our families. We have been chosen, here on this corner, from this beautiful and sacred home, to preach the love of Christ to this community with our presence and with our worship and with our service.

One day, Jesus chose three of his disciples as witnesses to his power and his glory. They saw every bit of that, but they didn't quite get the point. (Look at stopwatch) But I suppose we'll have to save that story for another time. (Click) Amen.