

18

Oct

Chosen

Always Give Thanks

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

But the lectionary invites us to start our thanksgiving early. Before the turkey and pumpkin pie and even before the trick-or-treaters come to our doors, we have the opening salutation of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians: "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in..."

REFERENCES

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

What does it mean to be chosen? Paul calls the Christians in Thessalonica "beloved by God" and says that God has chosen them. It must have made them feel good. We know what it is to be chosen (or maybe we know the pain of not being chosen). We know about exclusion and inclusion. We understand what it means to be part of something bigger than ourselves, or we long to.

That's what Paul is talking about: that participation. He claims to know that the Thessalonians are chosen because the Word came to them. That's an interesting claim. He knows their chosenness,

their inclusion, because the word, the word he brought, came to them, and they received it. So, is listening to the word being chosen? Or is it that only those who are chosen can hear it —or hear into it? Is it only the chosen who can hear something bigger, something deeper? That is how your chosenness is identified, says Paul.

Actually, he says something more. It wasn't just hearing the word; it was receiving the power. Ah, there we have it. The special ones are the ones chosen, the ones we read about in our history, the ones we're not a hundred percent sure we believe. But wouldn't it be great? Those miracles, those unexplained actions that a special few can do, or pretend to do, or convince people that they can do. That is what this is about, isn't it? Wonder workers, celebrities, heroes, and heroines of the faith: those are the chosen.

Admit it: that has long been a suspicion we've had. We've felt that it wasn't about us, the ordinary ones, but about the special ones. And good for them. Really. We need heroes and heroines. We need models to look up to, to emulate, or to imitate. Paul throws that in: "And you became imitators of me" (1 Thess. 1:6 NRSV). You, not you individually, but you all, all y'all. You became a community that lived faith, that grew in faith, that sought ways to act out faith. You—all y'all—did that. That's how he knows you were chosen, because you are living it, because others are encouraged by you, by the example you are setting, and by the hope you are living.

Chosenness is about ripples. Like any gift of the Spirit, it isn't given primarily for you, for the one receiving it. You are chosen to be an influence, to be an example. Many wonder what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in today's crazy world. They figure it out by looking to you, to your community, to the witness that you give in word and deed, in mission and in service.

You can ask how the surrounding countries learned about the faithfulness, the chosenness of the disciples in Thessalonica. We don't know. Paul says he didn't need to talk about it. Maybe he meant he didn't need to keep talking about it. Maybe he told, but then the word spread. We don't know. And in the end, it doesn't really matter. The message here is that you are an example, the light on the hill that Jesus talked about. That's you. That's all y'all. Parents learn early on that they are being watched by the little ones they are raising, even when they aren't "on" or intentionally parenting. They are being watched. There are folks in your town who wonder what it means to follow Christ. They wonder what it means to belong to a church. Sure, they could go to church themselves to find out, but they don't need to. They just see you. Are you an example of the joys of discipleship? Are you one who loves God and neighbor with equal passion and commitment? What do your neighbors see when they look at you? At your church? Do they wonder if they might be welcomed

if they wander in one day? Or is your church like a social club that they don't have the credentials to join?

Paul says you are chosen because you responded. Being chosen is not an award or a medal that you can wear with pride. It is a call to follow Christ, to put on the yoke, to live outwardly and openly in a way that increasingly stands out in the culture around us these days. That call begins with gratitude.

Paul addresses his hearers by saying he always gives thanks to God for them. For us. For those who have been chosen, for those who have responded. We join him in this thankfulness and give thanks for the call on our lives and for the disciples who stand with us for support and encouragement. We give thanks for the opportunity for the ripples to go out from the little things we do to lift up those around us. We give thanks for the gift of life itself and the blessing of living in a world of wonders. We have been chosen for all of this and more. Thanks be to God.

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