

Sermon for February 1, 2020 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 (EHV)

**Theme: Consider your call to faith.**

- 1) *God didn't choose you for your ability.*
- 2) *He chose you for his glory.*

*<sup>26</sup>For example, consider your call, brothers. Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were powerful, and not many were born with high status. <sup>27</sup>But God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong, <sup>28</sup>and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one may boast before God. <sup>30</sup>But because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. <sup>31</sup>God did this so that, just as it is written, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."*

What do you think is more important for a team's success: having a superstar player or an excellent coach? I think it's having a great coach. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Bo Ryan used to coach basketball at the University of Wisconsin and always put together formidable teams throughout his long tenure. Why? Was it because he was lucky enough to draft superstars? Actually, Bo Ryan was known for doing somewhat of the opposite. He often drafted lesser skilled players who were passed over by other elite colleges, but had a great work ethic. With these kinds of players, he would put together winning teams that played extremely well and were loyal to each other.

Yes, when it comes to a team's success, a great coach makes all the difference in the world. This is why I can't stand hot shot athletes, who brag as if they are God's gift to the world. Their pride often causes so much jealousy and rivalry that, even if they are great players, the whole team suffers.

Overly proud teammates: could such a thing happen in the Christian Church? Sadly it happens all the time. Worse yet, every single one of us is guilty of it! "How can that be," someone might ask, "I have never bragged about my Christianity." Well, maybe not verbally; but your heart tells a different story, doesn't it?

Have you ever thought, "Why do pastors keep pushing Bible class attendance? I've learned this stuff as a kid and know it well enough." Or how about: "Why do the elders talk to me about my lack of Church attendance? Why don't they talk to so and so over there, whose sin is much worse than mine?" Have you ever looked at other Christians and thought, "If the pastor only knew what *they* did this week. . ."

Do you know what all those thoughts have in common? The person thinking them assumes that they are "better" than their teammates - that they don't need to come to practice (Worship and

Bible Class) or listen to their coach's (the LORD's) instruction. And what does the Christian look like who thinks these thoughts? He looks like me. He looks like you. Yes, without even realizing it, we all have been the guy so full of himself in his heart that he hurts his team.

This is why we would do well to pay attention to our sermon text. Why? Because it reminds us that everything we have and are as Christians comes not from ourselves, but from the LORD. He has graciously chosen us for his team. He blessed us with every gift necessary to live and work to his glory. Let us consider these things under the theme: **Consider your call to faith.** 1) *God didn't choose you for your ability.* 2) *He chose you for his glory.*

### Part One: God didn't choose you for your ability.

Our sermon text is part of a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a congregation he founded in Corinth – a godless, immoral city situated in Greece. While in Ephesus, Paul received a report that this congregation was facing a lot of different problems – one of which was members bragging about things like: who baptized them, which called worker they followed, their knowledge, etc., etc.

Paul knew that their sinful bragging was detrimental to the unity the congregation shared in Christ. This is why Paul reminds the Corinthians that the called worker they followed and who baptized them is of no consequence. All that matters is Christ, and the unity they shared in him.

God doesn't want Christians to be like the world - bragging about their own wisdom and accomplishments. He wants us to glory in Christ and the Gospel of his cross – a message that the world considers utter foolishness, but that is, in fact, the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. For this reason, right before our text, the apostle writes: *the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*<sup>1</sup>

The congregation of Corinth was living proof of God's wise “foolishness” and powerful “weakness”. Paul writes: <sup>26</sup>*For example, consider your call, brothers. Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were powerful, and not many were born with high status.*

The congregation of Corinth was not an elite team of highly trained theologians, philosophers, politicians and rhetoricians, who could easily sway the masses of Corinth to the Gospel of Christ. No, quite the opposite was true. While the congregation probably had a few wealthy members, none were, what we would call, people of influence. Most members were probably from the poorer or less influential rungs of society – Jewish converts, day laborers, slaves, and former prostitutes. The members that composed this congregation came with all sorts of baggage and struggled with all kinds of sin – some of which even the greater population of Corinth considered shameful (and that's saying something, if you know anything about that ancient city!) These are the people God chose to represent him and his grace in the community around them.

“But why would God do this?” We might be tempted to ask. “Why didn't God choose more influential people to represent him – people with less baggage, who had their act together?”

Wouldn't that have had a greater impact on the community and brought many more souls to Christ?"

This reminds me of a conversation I had with my children in the car, last Sunday. One of them said: "It's too bad Megan and Harry aren't moving to Ottawa, but at least there is a WELS Church in Vancouver for them to attend." I mentioned to the kids that Harry and Megan aren't Lutheran, to which one of my children said: "I know, but wouldn't it be cool if they converted? Just think of the example they could be."

Have you ever imagined how cool it would be if a famous celebrity or world leader converted to Christianity? I know I have – many times. Wouldn't they be able to bring more "wins" for the Church than people like you and me?

But God's thoughts are not our thoughts.<sup>ii</sup> God chooses the people he chooses for a reason. And what reason was that? Our text tells us:

*God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong,<sup>28</sup> and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before God.*

The history of Christianity is fascinating to study. Throughout time, the Christian Church has been composed mainly of uneducated, weak, and lowly people. I know of no other group that has faced as many dangers from without as well as from within as the Christian Church; things like mockery, persecution, false doctrine, power struggles, war . . .

Humanly speaking, it's absolutely astonishing that the Gospel is still preached today. And yet, here it is. Why? Was it because of all the superstar believers throughout Church history – like the apostle Peter and the reformer Luther? No, even these men were nothing special in and of themselves. Peter was a fisherman and Luther the son of a commoner. God alone accomplished the spread and success of his Gospel. Without his continuous blessing Christianity would have failed long ago. We have him alone to thank for the faith we have.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we would all do well to soberly reflect on who we truly are: a diverse group of people from varied backgrounds. We come to this congregation with all sorts of baggage and struggles. We are all spiritual beggars in his sight – incapable of doing anything right before him. We are all sinful and in need of His mercy.

Part Two: *He chose you for his glory.*

And yet God, graciously chose us! Can you believe it? We get to be members of his team! Why, because we're so holy and great? No, rather because the LORD loves us so dearly, as we read:

<sup>30</sup>*But because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, namely, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*

It's only because of God that we are in Christ Jesus. We did not choose him, but he chose us from before the creation of the world. In love, he determined to send his Son to suffer and die for our sins. In love, he determined to send the Holy Spirit to awaken repentance and faith in our hearts so that we might receive the benefits of his Son's work on our behalf. Our salvation is completely God's choosing and doing – accomplished for us in Christ.

Yes, everything we have and are is because of Jesus. He is *the wisdom from God* - the fullness of the deity in bodily form.<sup>iii</sup> To know him is to know the LORD. To listen to him is to listen to God. And where do we hear Jesus? We hear him in his Word that is taught and preached here, and in every other faithful Christian church.

Jesus is our *righteousness*, who declares us free and forgiven of all sin because of his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection on our behalf. This righteousness is ours through faith in the Gospel. He is our *sanctification*, who purified us from all sins through the water of Holy Baptism by clothing us with himself.<sup>iv</sup> He is our *redemption*, who bought us back for God by the offering up of his body and blood on the cross, which he freely gives to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Everything we have and are is because of the grace God has shown us in Christ, as St. Paul says elsewhere: *Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them.*<sup>v</sup>

Yes, we are God's workmanship. Without him we are nothing and accomplish nothing. God chose us, not because we are so great, but because we are so weak.

<sup>31</sup>*God did this so that, just as it is written, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: whenever you are tempted to sinfully judge a fellow Christian in your heart, or to view a fellow member's godly concern and encouragement as harassment that you don't need because you are "fine" in your faith – remember who you are. We are all sinners who, in and of ourselves, have no wisdom, power or ability to save ourselves. But God has graciously chosen us to be on his team – not that we might brag about our talents and abilities, but to use everything God has graciously given us to the glory of his name.

And how can we glorify God's name? Luther tells us in his Small Catechism: [God's name is glorified] *when his Word is taught in its truth and purity, and we as children of God lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!*<sup>vi</sup>

Yes, may the LORD ever help us to this end: that we glorify his saving name by learning and living his Gospel. Such a life starts with a humble reflection of who we are and our need for his mercy and grace. Therefore, dear Christian, take the opportunities God gives you to **Consider your call to faith.** *He didn't choose you for your ability. He chose you for his glory.* Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25 (EHV)

<sup>ii</sup> cf. Isaiah 55:8-9

<sup>iii</sup> cf. Colossian 2:9

<sup>iv</sup> cf. Galatians 3:26

<sup>v</sup> Ephesians 2:10 (NIV84)

<sup>vi</sup> Explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Petition of the Lord's Prayer.