

Sermon: "You're Chosen! Really?"  
Sunday, May 22, 2011  
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector  
Christ Church, Shaker Heights  
Easter V, Year A: John 14:1-14

Hey, I know. I'm as surprised to see you here today, as you must be to see me. I mean the Rapture was yesterday and we're still here! Yesterday was the day the saved, the righteous believers, were supposed to be swept up into heaven. Those left behind were to experience Armageddon, a time of great tribulation until Christ comes again and the world as we know it ends. But as the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim's Follies tune say, "I'm still here!"

You know being here today means one of two things, either we are among those left behind or Harold Camping of the Family Radio Network who calculated May 21st as the day of the Rapture was wrong. Though I read that Camping is about 80 million dollars richer since he broadcast his calculation. Not a bad take for a ruse. I'll leave you to your own conclusions about the Rapture. But ask yourself this: Anyone you know been missing as of yesterday?

People who believe in the Rapture do so based on a conviction that somehow they have been selected by God as being set apart; as being a special people particularly chosen by God. The term "being saved" is one of the more common phrases used to describe this set apart-ness. Sometimes there are requirements or prerequisites for being saved. But sometimes there are none. Some folks profess that how devout or pietistic you are is what saves you. Others think being saved is the moment you accepted or professed Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Still others believe it is a status that is predestined by God before your birth and therefore nothing over which you have any control.

Being set apart by God over and above other people is not unique to certain expressions of Christians or even to Christianity. Fundamentalist Christians buy into this dogma, but so do Roman Catholics. The Presbyterian Church was founded on the belief of predestination of the elect, although it is one they have pretty much left behind, if you will.

The entire premise of Judaism is one of being God's chosen people, set apart, over and above non-Jewish gentiles or what the scripture refers to as "the nations."

Islam holds similar beliefs. In the Quran it states, "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost (All spiritual good). [Qur'an 3:85]

How do we come to terms with the contradiction that some people are set apart as beloved of God with today's lesson from John where Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:1-2)

This passage is one of the more challenging sayings of Jesus. Should Christians believe Jesus when he says there being many dwelling places, or rooms, in God's house, rooms where there is a place for everyone? Or do they believe that God plays favorites and chooses only one group of people to be saved?

Many Christians, including me, understand this passage as indicating that there is plenty of room for a wide diversity of people in God's house. That humans from every family, language, people, religion and nation are welcome and redeemed by God and not just a select few. Theologically this belief is known as universalism.

By the way: universalism is not an "anything goes" theology. Behavior still matters. People who believe in universal salvation do so with the understanding that leading a life of loving God and loving neighbor is boilerplate to anyone's salvation.

I had lunch with the Rev. Daniel Budd on Thursday. Daniel is the senior minister at First Unitarian Church here in Shaker. He told me that this summer he is attending the fiftieth anniversary of the union of the Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church. I was surprised as I thought the merger between these two churches was a late nineteenth century event and not so recent. Daniel said that at the time the merger was almost a moot point. In the 1900's Universalism was the fourth largest religious denomination in the country but by 1961 the denomination was down to 13,000 members and headed toward extinction. When I asked him how that happened he replied that the belief in universal salvation had become so prevalent in much of Christianity that a Church based on this doctrine was no longer necessary.

Clearly the pendulum has swung back in the other direction. Anti-universalism is a strongly held belief of many Christians.

The recent controversy that has erupted in the evangelical world over a book published by Rob Bell gives us some indication of just how far the pendulum has swung.

Bell is a savvy evangelical preacher and writer. His most recent book is titled, "Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Has Ever Lived." The book has created a tremendous uproar in evangelical churches and seminaries where Bell is being castigated as an apostate.

You see at one time Bell was a conservative evangelical who believed that he was saved; someone set apart by God over and above other people. Bell experienced an epiphany

into this belief during an art show based on the theme of peace held at his church several years ago. One artist in that exhibit included a quote from Mahatma Gandhi in her artwork.

Someone in Bell's church attached a note to the art with the following message, "Reality check: He's in hell."

Bell writes, "Really? Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?"

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number 'make it to a better place' and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?"

Of course the answer to all those questions is no.

Bell is not exploring new theological territory in his questioning who's in and who's out in God's salvation plan. Anglican theologians and writers have been doing this for a long time, many having weighed in on the side of universal salvation. But we Anglicans are noted for using our human reason in approaching and understanding scripture and so our embrace of universal salvation is not surprising. Bell is causing a huge stir in the evangelical world because selective biblical literalism is the plumb line most evangelicals use to guide their faith lives.

It is alien – completely inconceivable – for me to see in Jesus a God who sets apart people for salvation based on some set of particularities like who they are, if they can recite the exact moment they accepted Jesus as their Savior, how they read the Bible, how they worship and even if they engage in traditional worship at all. And if you do, then ask yourself this: why is it that those who make the claim that one group is saved and everyone else isn't – why is it that those who make this claim are always a member of the saved group?

As Bell says, "Have you ever heard people make claims about a select few being the chosen and then claim they are not part of that group?"

Centuries of particularist and exclusivist claims by people of faith have had an almost unfathomable corrosive impact on human life. It does not matter who holds them or how they get justified, these doctrines of chosen-ness need to be let go of. Chosen-ness needs to be tossed into the dustbin of human history. And I mean this of all people who claim they are God's chosen, not just the one's we don't like.

Holding this theology has only fomented strife, dissent, mockery, hatred and at times bloodshed and death between peoples, nations and religions. Chosen-ness continually brings the world to the edge of apocalypse. It needs to end. As the theologian Harvey Cox says, "We need to doxologize the fragile oneness of the whole earth and all its inhabitants."

In God's house there are many rooms. Jesus is there and has prepared a place for each of God's children. This is the vision of the Kingdom come. This vision is a poignant reminder that without the universal dream of salvation the world will remain a dangerous place, a place where people will falsify and manipulate the message of God's good news for their own needs. Denying that God's house is a place with more than enough dwelling places for all God's children is to diminish the scope of Jesus' vision and the hope for humanity to obtain God's kingdom.

The authentic way, truth and life of Jesus Christ our Savior leads us to know other wise.

*Amen.*