

St. Andrew's UMC
October 12th, 2008
Matthew 22:1-14
"But Few Are Chosen"

Once I was watching a segment of training program of the Navy SEALs. In the large pool, the trainees were treading the water with their hands tied in the back. I do not remember how long they were supposed to stay afloat, but I thought it looked pretty challenging.

Then there was a part in which each trainee fill their scuba mask with water, while underwater, and breathe through the mouthpiece of the aqualung. One trainee was having difficulty breathing, because he kept sucking water through his nose, and water got into the airways. He was taken out of the pool, and was being given a separate instruction. Unless he masters the technique, it was obvious that he would be washed out. I was thinking, how can you keep the water entering through the nose, if you were wearing the mask full of water and breathe through the mouth, while underwater?

But I understood the reason for such training: water would eventually get into the mask during the rigors of the mission, or the mask could be damaged or lost. If the SEAL did not learn how to breathe through the mouth, he might die, or the mission could fail. Can you imagine a SEAL suddenly surfacing in the view of the enemy, coughing up a storm? And the enemy would understand, and let him have another go at it, this time with a dry mask, right?

That was nothing, actually, compared to getting a group suntan on the beach. You are sitting on the beach with your buddies. The wind caressed your skin, while the waves splashed over your body. Only it was hours before dawn, and you were stripped to your underwear, violently shaking. The arms of your buddies locked into yours were the only thing that kept the group from breaking up and getting lost in the dark water.

I could think of infinitely better things to do than getting a group suntan before the dawn. But then again, if you cannot overcome the cold ocean on a safe beach, can you reach your destination,

accomplish your mission, and return home in one piece in the actual contingency?

Many are called but few are chosen. How does the Bible view of the chosen? Isaiah gives us a glimpse (Ch. 48):

¹⁰ Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

Such an imagery of being tried in the furnace is also given in I Peter (Ch. 1):

⁷ That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

If we imagined the opposite of the furnace, wouldn't it be the rigors of the Navy SEAL training? God does it with a burning furnace, and the Navy SEALs do it in the freezing water. Precious metal is refined in the crucible, and iron is tempered in the heat treatment. Are the trials of life necessarily evil in nature, and to be avoided?

What was Jesus' own practice of choosing? Many followed him, but he chose only 12 disciples. Can God's calling be deemed to be the practice in elitism? Yes and no. It is "Yes," in the sense that God chooses those who are committed to the discipleship, tried in the furnace, and proved their mettle. It is "No," in the sense that God calls everyone to serve. Everyone is called to serve, but only the few actually do the service.

God has called Jesus to be the Messiah, and what did he have to go through? The Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus had to prove to himself that he was fit for the particular calling God had prepared for him. God called Jesus to a mission, and Jesus had to account for his fitness for the mission. Jesus had to keep up with the rigors of the accountability during those 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Accountability is another dimension of the faithfulness.

Everyone seeks praise, glory, and honor, but not every one wants to endure God's training program in the furnace. Not every one is willing to account for God's requirement and training.

The Christians need to understand: God loves everyone, but not everyone is useful, obedient, or faithful to God's purpose. What are God's criteria for choosing among those who have been called?

Do you believe that God chooses everyone, when he calls everyone? If that was how we believe, then, is it also our practice of choosing? Do we actually call everyone, and choose everyone?

How about selecting a running mate for the presidency? For such an important position, a presidential candidate will have to exercise a keen discernment. We can imagine that the presidential candidate will form a search committee, and the committee members will look for some one who fits the following human criteria: knowledge, expertise, experience, etc.

I was impressed when Republican presidential candidate, McCain, chose Palin. I was impressed with his courage to depart from the convention of all-male leadership which Mondale-Ferraro ticket demonstrated a couple decades ago. But I was confused, because, if he were seeking a female running mate with knowledge, expertise, and experience, who else fits the criteria better than Rice does?

Then I understood why Rice was overlooked: Rice does not wear Kazuo Kawasaki-designed MP-704 rimless sunglasses. I do not believe for a moment that it was the case of a Black woman's experience being discounted, compared to a White woman's inexperience. I am convinced of it, because a junior senator's inexperience is rightfully deemed, by his rival camp, inferior to a war-hero senator's experience.

If that is how things work in the human mind, what are God's criteria of choosing? In the Old Testament we remember that God chose a child Samuel to be the prophet, rejecting the High Priest, Eli (I Sam. 3). The house of Eli was corrupt. God rejected Saul, and chose a youth, David (I Sam. 16). God rejected King Saul, because greed got

better of him, and he disobeyed God's specific instruction not to take the spoils of war.

In the New Testament, we see a strange set of God's criteria, as taught by Jesus: the first will be the last; the last will be the first. The stone that is rejected by the builders will be the cornerstone. The lilies of the field have more glory than Solomon in all his glory. Unless the grownups become like children, they will never enter the kingdom of Heaven .

If so, the newbie will be the chief. The one whom the managers rejected the owner will select. The glory of the metropolitan king will yield to the beauty of a wildflower. God rejects the grownups with all the expertise and qualification, and choose child-like persons for the kingdom. God chooses purity over corruption every time. Is it the way things work in the human society?

In the Parable, it appears that Jesus compared those whom the king initially invited to his son's wedding to the Jews who rejected the invitation to the kingdom of Heaven . Then the invitation went out to those in the streets, meaning, the Gentiles. Even then the King expects those who accepted the invitation to observe the protocol, by wearing the proper ceremonial dress to the wedding.

Once interpreted thus, one may accuse that the Gospel of Matthew as anti-Semitic, while another might conclude that the parable is not authentic saying of Jesus, because Jesus would hardly have believed that the Gentiles would inherit the kingdom of Heaven . But neither changes the meaning of the statement that many are called, but few are chosen.

Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, if you reject the invitation from God, the invitation will go to others who will accept it. If you accepted God's invitation, then you must do your part to fit into God's occasion. You must account for your qualification.

How is it different from the Navy SEAL? If you applied for a slot in the Navy SEAL, then you have to do your part to fulfill all the requirements. Navy SEAL chooses those who have successfully fulfilled all the requirements. God chooses those who have been

refined by fire. Or, God refines in the fire those whom he chooses. I Peter says do not be surprised, if this is the case.

Is it normal for Christians, then, to expect that they are exempt from any harsh conditions of life, that their faith journeys avoid trials and temptations, that their plans take priority over God's, and that they deserve to enter the kingdom of Heaven by default of being a church member, or of being considered a "good" person? Are they exempt from having to account for their commitments? And they still believe that it is truly the sign of God's blessing, if everything worked out according to their plans, and they enjoyed an easy and privileged life?

If everyone is saved, because everyone happened to believe that one is, then the Heaven must be bursting with Christians. Nowadays, just about every Christian claims that he is saved. I do not know where they get that idea, but Jesus clearly says here: many are called, but few are chosen. Nowadays, some one revised the message: many are called, and everyone is chosen.

Sin distorts perception. It gives the sinner the narcissistic idea that he is special and better than the others, when he is not. The distorted perception feeds the selfish desire that God stay on our side, no matter how awfully we behave. The distorted perception convinces the sinner that he is chosen, when he would not be—therefore, sealing his fate in the delusion that he is saved.

Jesus gave us a glimpse of who are chosen. Although many holler that Jesus' Way is the only way, although many clamor that they are saved, Jesus still says: "**Many are called, but few are chosen.**"