

## **CHOICES, CHOSEN**

**Year A – Pentecost 22 – Proper 24**

**Sermon given by Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close - October 20, 2002**

This story came to me from a priest I know in Northern Jersey. He's an avid baseball fan, so with the World Series underway this weekend, I thought I would share it too. It helps us to put life into perspective and emphasizes the importance of choices.

At a fundraising dinner for a learning-disabled school, one father gave a speech that won't be forgotten. After complimenting the school and its dedicated staff, he offered a question. "Everything God does is done with perfection and a purpose. Yet, my son, Shay, can't learn things as other children do. Where is God's plan reflected in my son?" The audience was quiet. The father continued, "I believe that God brings a child like Shay into the world as an opportunity for us to realize when the Divine Plan presents itself. It comes in the way people chose to treat that child."

The father told this story. He and Shay were walking past a park where some boys they knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think that they will let me play?" The father knew that most boys wouldn't want him on their team. He also knew that his son needed a sense of belonging. The father approached one of the boys on the field. He asked him if Shay could play.

The boy looked around for guidance from his other team members. When he got none, he made a choice to take things into his own hands. "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team. We'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning." In the bottom of the inning, Shay's team scored a few runs, but still was behind by three.

At the top of the ninth, Shay put on a glove and played in the outfield. No hits came his way, but he was ecstatic just to be on the field. Shay grinned from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth, Shay's team scored again. Now with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base. Shay was scheduled to be next at bat. Would they let him bat at this point and give away the chance to win the game?

To the father's surprise, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible. Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less hit the ball. However, as Shay stepped to the plate, the pitcher moved up a few steps to lob the ball softly so Shay might make contact. The first pitch came ... Shay swung too late and missed the ball. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shay. The pitch came in ... Shay swung the bat and hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher.

The pitcher picked up the soft grounder. He could have easily thrown the ball to first base to end the game. Instead, the pitcher made a choice. He took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field. It fell far beyond the reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Run Shay! Run to first base!" Never in his life had Shay made it to first

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base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled, “Run to second! Run, Shay, run!”

By the time Shay had rounded first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to second base for the tag. But the fielder understood the pitcher’s intentions. He choose to throw the ball high and far over the third baseman’s head. Shay ran towards second base and the other runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home. As Shay reached second base, the shortstop ran to him, and turned him towards third base. He shouted, “Run to third!”

As Shay rounded third base, the boys from both teams were screaming, “Shay! Run home!” Shay ran home and stepped on home plate. He was cheered as a hero. Shay hit a grand slam and won the game for his team. “That day,” the father said softly, “the boys from both teams made choices. They chose to help bring a piece of the Divine Plan into this world.”

The world would say the boys were foolish. Life is about winning. We witnessed on the news again this weekend parents fighting at their children’s game. They were upset at the results of the game. They took out their anger and frustration in a brutal way. Our culture tells us that it’s about making choices so we can be #1. We must choose the right schools, the right jobs, the right spouses, the right neighborhood. But for us as Christians, it is about choosing to be different. We have been chosen by God to answer a higher calling.

Dr. William Willimon says the Scripture today talks about making choices and the fact that we are chosen. The reality is that we fall short of being Christian disciples all the time. We don’t serve God as we ought. We so easily look to self-serving ways. The truth is that we are called. We have been chosen to follow Christ. Our discipleship was God’s idea first. Jesus calls us to follow him, to imitate his way. Christ calls us to witness and serve God. We also are told to encourage each other to do this. We are to create a welcoming, supporting environment for all Christians ... not just the few people that we like or agree with. Jesus calls us to give to God what is God’s. That means we are to practice radical hospitality. We are to teach and share with each other what it means to be a Christian.

We have choices. We gather in Church, but little unites us. If we pay attention to the news these days, Episcopalians are battling over so many issues. We come from different places. Some of us have much, others have little. Some of us are blessed with many talents, others may only do one thing well. Some of us know a lot of the Bible, others can’t find Genesis or Revelation in the Holy Scripture.

The only thing that we share in common is that we are all called by God. We are all chosen. It is God that makes us one. Not our politics, not our socio-economic status, not our gender or race. God has given us gifts to grow the Kingdom of God here and now. It’s about time that we used them! God has given us Jesus Christ and faith. It’s about

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time that we trusted God and believed. We are Chosen. God believes more in us more than we believe in ourselves.

Paul talks about the Chosen and God's plan in the letter to the Thessolonians today. Paul is writing to a struggling congregation. He offers them first encouragement and affirmation. Paul challenges them to take the long view! He says they may be struggling now, but God has a better future in mind. Paul reminds them that they are chosen. He says, "God has chosen you!" God plans to take the world back through us. By the grace of God, we can make choices that bring the Divine Plan into being!

We are facing many challenges here at Grace Church. Some would say we are doomed. Others say we can't do it. What about the present? Few of us can see the future. We are doing too much, we are doing too little. Some people feel overwhelmed. The reality is that Jesus has placed us here for a purpose. We have been given the keys to the Kingdom. The Good News is on our lips. Jesus believes more in us that we do in him. If God and Jesus believe in us, maybe it's time for us to believe in ourselves.

We have to make some choices. It's time to get back to the basics of being the Church. It's time to stop complaining and start helping to make God the center of our lives. We are called to teach and share the Christian faith. Christianity is more than the Golden Rule, belief in God and respect for Jesus. We must share what is special about our faith. It's time to make our identity, purpose and direction known.

This is the Church of God. We worship God through Jesus Christ. We are Christians, not Unitarians. The Holy Eucharist is the central liturgy that binds us. It is not the end of our faith but the beginning. Our purpose is to be Christians and help others become Christians. It's important to show our faith in words and actions. We are called to worship, to teach, and to serve. One of the ways we can do this is by making connections with others. We have to engage each other about our faith. We are called to create an environment that welcomes others in, but also teaches them about the Christian faith. We are more than a social club. Everywhere we turn, we can be making choices to serve our God.

It's not about winning. It's not about being number 1. It's not about how many members we have or how many social events we hold. What Grace Church is called to be is place where we make Jesus Christ known. We are chosen to be Christ's representatives in the world. God has chosen us and brought us together in this place at this time. What it's about is thinking differently. We are called to look for the ways to make a difference in the lives of others. We are called to be the kids playing that baseball game. We are called to take a risk, to choose to make another feel good ... even at the cost of losing the game. When we can make these kinds of choices, we truly are living into our call as the chosen of God.