

“Ridding Ourselves of the Chosen People Mentality”

Luke 3:1-9

1/28/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

When we first hear this brief description of John the Baptist coming out of the wilderness, baptizing and preaching, we tend to say to ourselves, “Well, that’s nice, but let’s move on to the more interesting things about Jesus.” But let’s take a few moments to notice the controversial nature of what John was doing. John the Baptist was setting the stage for the teaching work of Jesus – preparing for a new religion that was radically upsetting to the entire history of the Jewish tradition.

If you had the other gospel versions beside Luke’s verses, you would notice how careful Luke is to mention all the political and religious people in history. Only Luke mentioned Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas. Luke was emphasizing that Jesus wasn’t some ghost-like phantom that *perhaps* appeared to just a few religious fanatics – as some thought when Luke was writing this in the 80s of the first century.

John emerged from his hermit-like life-style in the wilderness in the 27th year¹ in order to introduce a new way of being Jewish. He came to announce the Messiah. But this is how different John’s message was, compared to the organized religion of his day.

The Priests, at that time, expressed their religion through the rituals of the temple – having people attend services every Saturday and offer their sin offerings on the altar.

The Pharisees, (the rabbis who worked in the neighborhood synagogues), taught that folks ought to conduct their rituals and say their prayers at home around meal times and during the course of the day (without traveling into Jerusalem to participate in the national-based cult). There was an enormous rift between the Priesthood and these scholarly-rabbis (who called themselves “the separated ones” or Pharisees). Aside from these differences of teaching and participation in rituals, most all Jews then

believed that being born Jewish made them participants in the community of God’s chosen people. To reinforce this “chosen people” mentality, they circumcised the males at birth, symbolizing how they were like Abraham – a people cut-off from the rest of the people in the world. The rest of the world they referred to as Gentiles.

What was John about? He was a priest’s son who was thoroughly familiar with the historic rituals of Judaism. He was extremely pious and practiced an ascetic life-style of voluntary simplicity, vegetarianism and prayer. Many Biblical scholars believe he was in the religious commune in Qumran, the group that had stored their scripture and commune instructional scrolls in the caves that had been discovered near the Dead Sea.

John took the Jewish custom of water baptism, combined it with the idea of repentance and change of behavior, and promised, in his preaching, that God would forgive a person’s sins if they truly repented. Repentance, change of behavior and baptism.

To the Jews, water baptism was a sign of conversion to Judaism – a sign of being brought back from the dead because they thought that non-Jews were like the dead. Interestingly enough, even up to this century, in a few circles of Judaism, if a Jew married a non-Jew, they would have a funeral service for that Jew, considering that person to be virtually dead to their community. That shows some of the depth of feelings the Jews had about the survival of their race.

What John was teaching, then, was shocking to the people’s way of thinking. He was saying that **the rituals, the prayers, the temple, and being born Presbyterian, . . . excuse me, Jewish, . . . is not what makes a person truly religious.** Instead, what matters most to God is for a person to take a close look at what they’re doing with their life – their behavior – and then experience a change of heart, followed by the appropriate change of their action.

¹ approximately, according to Biblical scholars

That is what the Isaiah passage was describing that John claimed he was fulfilling. Originally, the “making paths straight,” “valleys being filled” and “mountains lowered” were images of how Israel was coming out of exile and returning to rebuild. John’s words were also about a rebuilding but additionally a moral instruction suggesting that those who thought they were mountainous (with greatness) would be brought low. That those who were down in the valleys of despair, would be raised up. The “crooked being straightened” probably referred to crooked lives being ethically aligned.

John was blunt in his teaching about the need for humility and repentance. In verses 7-9, he confronted the religious leaders who came out to hear his messages. One day, when a delegation of religious authorities were in the crowd, John greeted them by saying, “And unless you people repent,” pointing at them, “you’re gong to be cut down and burned – just like when we cut down and destroy a useless tree that doesn’t bear any fruit.” By no means was John a smooth, diplomatic and comfortable-to-listen-to speaker.

The key words that reappear in John’s speeches are that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” He meant everyone, not just the pious Jews or their leaders, but everyone. But he pushed it even further, saying, “Now if you say that ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor!’ it doesn’t cut it. God doesn’t need our Jewish version of organized religion. In fact, if desired, God could raise stones from the ground to be people of Abraham.”²

For Luke, then, one of his central interests was that the religion of Christianity came first to the Jews, but would definitely spread out and extend to the Gentiles and to the entire the world. Keep this in mind as you read through the entire book of Luke and the second half of his writings, Acts.

In Luke’s writing, we see Jesus ministering to the Gentiles, telling His disciples to go to Jerusalem, Judea, even to the Samaritans (who were hated by Palestinian Jews) and ultimately to the furthest and most remote parts of the earth. In Acts, Luke showed

² see verse 8

us how Paul had to argue the Jerusalem Jewish Church to the ground into accepting the fact that Gentiles *were* becoming Christians. In fact, at one point, Paul was running up against a brick wall with these Jewish Christians who refused to allow non-Jews into the Christian faith circles without becoming Jewish so Paul gave up. He just stopped trying to make them open minded and accommodating and switched his entire ministry to Gentiles, abandoning Jewish Christians almost entirely.

John was announcing the universalism of the Gospel – the religion of Jesus being made available to all people – well beyond the so-called “chosen people” the Jews. So the point of all this is that John was asking his contemporaries, in the year 27, to rid themselves of the “chosen people” mentality and start getting their own personal lives in order. They were being asked to tear down their idols of exclusiveness of organized religion, the idol that they had erected of their Jewishness. They were to start realizing the enormous difference between organized religion and a life-style of cultivating true spirituality.

In a way, all of us have a tendency to have “the chosen people” mentality – no matter who we might be. We all settle into our comfortable patterns of religion, politics and social relationships. We go only to churches where we hear what we already agree with from public speakers. In a way, this is like trying to attend university courses where they cover and only test on things we already know and perspectives with which we agree.

To some extent, we all like to have a pecking order so that somehow, no matter who we are, there is always someone else we consider not as “good” or “worthy” as we believe ourselves to be. We are taught to live out our lives with hierarchical thinking.

In our hierarchical society, we see how the wealthy should look down on the upper-middle class. The upper-middle class, then, tends to snub their noses at blue-collar working folks, who in turn tend to look down on people of different races or ethnic backgrounds and then on people from other countries. When all else fails, all of them can pick on women. Why do we humans do this sort of thing?

One factor is because every person is insecure and has a lousy self-concept. Joe Schmo, Peter Jennings, Philip Siddons, Sandra Bullock, the Pope, the person who fixes our car down at the corner garage. We're insecure and want to find some sense of worth by trying to convince ourselves that the way WE do or believe things is more right than all others. And since we're right, we feel, we close ourselves off from others who differ because we mistakenly believe that if we have something else to learn, our worth isn't secure. Who is responsible for convincing us that we always have to be right about everything in order to validate our existence?

We cling to that unrealistic and anti-learning mentality because it is so much harder, so much more work, to keep re-examining our behavior and beliefs and change our actions. That's because change is work and each of us has the potential for being a little lazy when it comes to the hard work of changing our behavior and beliefs in order to spiritually grow.

Try this, if you will. Slowly think back through this past week and try to recall any time when you considered changing your perception or judgment about something and your related behavior. How about in the past month, . . . or six months? How about in the last several years, . . . have you grown in your world view or in your understanding of the breadth and depth of God's patience and unconditional love for us?

So all of us are tempted to relax and take a breather and tell ourselves that we must be the "chosen people" – at least in that we are devout, upstanding and regular church-attending members. We're certainly not like those thugs taking over the embassies or those slashing tires or selling their bodies on the street corners. We've sort of made it and the only thing left to which we must attend is to make sure that the Cemlawn[®] man comes this month and our cable TV reception is maintained. In some way, we *tend* to believe that the people "out there" who are struggling economically, socially, legally or who are not living with the same kind of predictable "safe" life-style as our own, must have, in some way, brought their woes on themselves. "Losers." Very

indecent and disorderly and certainly *not* Presbyterian.

Obviously I'm exaggerating and a little cynical but I think if we look into even some of our American history, we find examples of how our nation has exhibited the "chosen people" mentality. I stumbled across some American history about the Native Americans that wasn't in my textbooks.

Christopher Columbus once said, about the American Indians, that "these savages would be easy to convert to the European way of living, so that they could go to work for us." So in his four voyages to America, he brought back over 2,000 Native Americans to be sold as slaves. But in 1537, Pope Paul the 3rd came to the controversial and radical position that the Indians *do* have souls.

The Puritans, escaping from England and France, (somewhat like the Israelites who had escaped from Egypt's religious and physical oppression), certainly considered themselves the "chosen people." Although the Wampanaug Indians enabled the first settlers survive the winter, their friendship with these folks was destroyed, shortly afterward, by the Puritans. In a town meeting in Massachusetts in 1640, the people passed the following resolutions:

1. The earth is the lord's and the fullness thereof.
2. The Lord may give the earth, or any part of it, to the chosen people.
3. We are God's chosen people.

With their "covenant theology," they justified their attempt to exterminate the Indians.

You see, it's a very small step from the thinking that God makes deals with a chosen people, to the thought that God has made a deal with only us, to being exclusive, being THE chosen people.

Following that, the Native American peoples were chased Westward. In 1787, Congress proclaimed that it would never take the Indian lands, except in "just wars." Yet there were never any "unjust wars" as we continued to drive them out of their lands.

In 1830, the Indian Removal Act (under Andrew Jackson) ruled that all land west of the Mississippi belongs to the Native Americans once and for all,

except two main paths to California and the state of California. It was ordered that all remaining 14,000 Indians march West of the Mississippi to make way for the chosen people. In that forced march, 4,000 of them died because of the hardships.

Needless to say, we took the rest of the land West of the Mississippi as well, put surviving Native Americans on reservations and then shrunk the reservations almost out of existence. One year, the Indians heard that white missionaries were giving out clothing. Soon, entire tribes died out but it was later discovered that the clothing had been intentionally infested with small pox. All to make way for us, God's chosen people, the land of the free and the home of the brave.

In His very first message to the people of His home town, Jesus told it the way it was and they tried to kill Him. He said He's going to speak to the poor, release the people who are captive to one thing or another, help people recover their sight and liberate the oppressed. But Jesus didn't say He was only going to gather a chosen few who were somehow better than others and forever limit His elite following to those who were Jewish males.

I suggest we are being asked, by this passage, to look beyond the comfort and the sameness of just our known friends in the Presbyterian or even Protestant or middle-class culture.

There may be someone at work who is so bitter about not getting his early retirement that he takes it out on everyone around him with vileness and bitterness. Perhaps there's a foul-mouthed woman in the office who, because of the many hurts in her past, feels the need to act uppity to people around her.

Perhaps we are called to recognize that we are chosen to be someone special to that elderly couple who have just been removed from society and are just surviving with little dignity in a nursing home. Or maybe the neighbor who won't speak to you for one reason or another.

Or when we're downtown, to be a human being and even friendly to the ashen-pale woman on the street who needs 25 dollars to supply herself and her pimp with another fix of heron.

Here's one that's almost unbearable. Perhaps we are being called to be a compassionate Christian colleague, and learn from another child of God, in a discussion of an issue with which our own denomination is struggling. Remember how Protestant faith expressions used to honor and allow margin in one's individual conscience in the midst wrestling with newly emerged ethical issues that were not directly discussed in the Bible?

If we have been chosen, in *any* sense of the word, it seems that we have been chosen for two things. ① To be people who are spiritually attentive in that we constantly reexamine our thoughts and behavior, repent when needed and actually change our world view and accompanying behavior. ② To be people who spread the good news of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ – spreading it by showing others exactly what unconditional love looks like in how we treat them.

Let's forever rid ourselves of "the chosen people" mentality. Instead, let us remember that we are chosen only to serve others. To serve everyone with whom we come in contact by treating them as if you and I are people who have repented, . . . that you and I have actually changed the way they think and act, . . . that you and I have a humble but joyful sense that a loving God is standing right next to us trying to embrace them in love.

In the end, right before we die, we'll realize that the only thing in our life that truly mattered was our compassion. Now is our only chance to get this right.

