

Sermon: Year B, Six Easter

Texts: Acts 10:44-48

I John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

My wife grew up on the shore and loves the water, and, thus, it is much to her dismay that I have repeatedly proven that I am unable to float – not in the ocean, not in a lake, not even in a pool. I can swim, poorly. I can tread water at length. But I cannot float. Trish insists that it's easy. And I watch her every time she tries again to show me how – but to no avail.

I like to blame this on my genes, which is currently the most fashionable excuse available. I'm Dutch, and the Dutch have spent generations fighting the waters, pushing back the seas, building dikes, fearing breaches and fretting about floods. Water is the enemy than which no greater can be conceived. This is my deeply inscribed default setting. No matter the season, I prefer avoiding the water, but on those rare occasions when I'm coerced to be immersed in it, I inevitably resort to thrashing. I can't think of it as she does, as a vast comfort where she can relax, buoyed and perfectly at ease. I stubbornly resist. It always seems to me to be an alien threat, even when Trish insists that all I have to do is trust, for a moment, that I won't sink.

It's an embarrassing admission, partly because this is such a small and personal matter – very local. But there's something fundamental about this problem, too – fundamental in the sense that there seems to be no effective way to cross the distance between Trish's ability and my failure. She floats. I splash. She can explain the physics of floating. She can patiently provide a number of techniques by which to achieve this lovely stasis. She can fill my mind with all sorts of helpful metaphors so that I can imagine floating while trying to do it. But there always remains a troublesome gap between her efforts and my attempts. Ultimately, success will depend on my crossing some distance that I can't understand ahead of time, in the water suddenly finding a mysterious capacity not to fight it, giving up my own impulses in order to discover a broader truth – that it will indeed, and surprisingly, support me. On even such a simple matter as this, however, I must confess, I haven't gotten there yet.

Now in the Gospel read this morning, Jesus makes a similarly local and a similarly fundamental statement. He tells his disciples that they did not choose him. He chose them. On a personal level, this is merely a reiteration of the facts. They were fishermen. He called. They followed. Case closed. It makes little difference to us, centuries later.

But this one statement is more fundamental than that. In truth, it describes a gap that defines the whole world. These two simple clauses delineate who it is who chooses whom, and everything that is good or evil and true or false is balanced in the space between them. The important task for us is to stretch out the meaning of this statement to the point that it addresses all that we know. It wasn't meant to be just a local remark between friends. It's a cosmic statement, applicable across all space and all time. What follows from this conviction must be drawn out in ever wider circles.

Closest to us, we are reminded that it is not we who decide whether God exists or not; we exist because God has chosen us and has given us life and breath. Our task, therefore, is not to ponder

and examine and then declare whether we are justified in believing in God, fashioning God according to our own discernment; our task is rather to listen to God in order to discover how God encounters and engages us. God is sovereign, and we are God's subjects. God is not an object of our curiosity; we are the object of God's passion.

More broadly, we often presume that the world stands on its own, quite independently. It is what is and can be taken for granted as brute reality. But what Jesus wants us to see is that the world itself is not a given. It is God's creation, God's continual choosing to make something out of nothing. It is what is being given by grace, and every level of nature stands, thus, and primarily, as the visible and continual consequence of God's deciding that it should be, in this way and of this order.

Expanding this even further, history is not the tale of everything eventually coming to naught, waxing but, inevitably, waning and disappearing into the past. It's rather the steady unfolding of God's glory, made all the more brilliant and distinct through the articulation of the flux of time. All that is, and all that was, and all that will be together makes manifest the richness of God's eternal choosing, which, it must be emphasized, is a choice made always in the affirmative. God's choosing is God's creating; God's choosing is God's sustaining; God's choosing is God's resurrecting; God's choosing is God's redeeming; God's choosing is God's saving without exception. There is nothing to which this statement of Jesus does not apply: "You did not choose me; I chose you." I am choosing you now. I will choose you forever. This is the fundamental truth of the world: and through God's choosing all the universe throughout all time can be understood and experienced as a rejoicing.

The real question for us, then, is whether we can float on this conviction. Certainly it can be said that our preference is often to thrash against it. We are inclined to believe and to insist that our lives are our own. We are, of course, the masters of ourselves. We make our own decisions. We construe our own world. We are sovereign, and God, at best, is an option for us to explore as we see fit. Sometimes. Maybe. If coerced.

But even more fundamentally, we must admit that there is no effective way to cross the distance between faith in God's sovereignty and our own desire to be resolutely independent. Jesus declares God's eternal intention: I am choosing you; but we still splash away, afraid to float, and no amount of explanation, demonstration, or witness is able to conclusively prove that we can in fact relax, perfectly buoyed and supported by God. For fear of sinking, we resist.

But there is no limit to Jesus' declaration. There is no one for whom this promise does not apply. We have been chosen, from eternity for eternity. God has decreed this without fail – not even death denies us this. So we may be encouraged in our own time and in our own lives to cross a distance we cannot understand ahead of time, to give up the impulses of our own struggles in order to discover that we are supported beyond all fear and measure. Surprisingly, we are able to float. Which, in religious terms might be described as seeing your life as prayer, and all things as communion with God.

This is God's word to us in Jesus: "You have not chosen me. I have chosen you."

I haven't yet fully arrived at this either. My floating often feels more like thrashing. But I'm close enough to find these waters exhilarating and adventurous. So I keep these words always ahead of me.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen