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Choosing to Love

Ephesians 1:3-6[7-14]

God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will....

Paul was deeply convinced out of his personal experience that God was for all people, regardless of their status or condition in life. That was the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He wanted to say to the Christians at Ephesus that in Jesus, they had been brought home to God by God's own love, which is always reaching out, bringing in, and bringing together.

Paul makes three astounding statements about what Jesus means as the embodiment and expression of God's love. First, God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." God's love for us and all people holds nothing back, lavishes on us every possible blessing. The blessing of God has been poured out on us from every sacred corner and crevice of the cosmos. We have been given everything we need to know ourselves as blessed and to live our lives as a blessing.

Not only that, God has "chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love." In Jesus we experience God's having chosen us from the beginning so that we might live the way we were created to live. We are made in the image of God, and what can that mean except that it is our truest identity to love with the same love that has given us life. God has not only created life a blessing but also given our lives the nature of chosenness and "call". Being chosen and called means that our living becomes an expression of the love with which we have been loved. Being "holy and blameless" does not mean being religiously pious so that we are preoccupied with our own purity or moral perfection. Christian life is the opposite of such self-centeredness. God's love liberates and empowers us to love with the out-looking, out-reaching love of God.

Then Paul writes: "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of God's glorious grace that God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." Paul uses the image of adoption to describe more emphatically the nature of God's love for us.

Thirty years ago, Kaye and I were lying in bed one February night, too excited to sleep. On the dresser sat a stuffed toy bear with a wind-up music box inside which we kept playing over and over. We had bought the bear to take with us to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, the next morning when we would meet the fourteen month-old boy who would become our son. Kaye was also seven months pregnant with our daughter. This was a time brimming with expectancy and shimmering with possibilities.

We were about to adopt Kent, a decision we had been working with for quite some time. We wanted to adopt a child regardless of whether or not we would be able to have a birth child. We ended up with both, and at about the same instant. So the idea and especially the reality of adoptive love has always been of great interest to me. My spiritual ears perk up every time I read Paul's writing about God's love "adopting" us. "God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will." I do not really like that translation so much. It has led to a lot of heady and burdensome doctrines, like "predestination," the idea that God has planned everything out and we are just living according to the plan. That is not what Paul is saying. A better rendering would be, "God decided beforehand, early on, to adopt us through Jesus Christ."

God has decided from the beginning to love us. The love that is at the heart of the cosmos, the love that called into being all that is--that love is not only an expression of divine affection, but also of a divine "will to love." Why? Because it gives God pleasure to love in this way! Isn't that incredible! The Power that courses through the creation not only brought us into being, gave us birth, but also

continues to reach out to us, to choose us. And all because it gives God joy!

No wonder Paul uses the image of adoption as he tries to describe the meaning of Jesus. We are all God's children simply by being human beings and part of God's creation. God's birth children, you might say. But Paul wants to say more about the meaning of Jesus. In him we know a love that continues to come to us, to reach out to us when we lose our way. Paul is a realist. He knows that we human beings, though born the children of God, drift into forgetfulness and wander into ways of living that harm others, ourselves, and the creation of which we are a part. Does that mean we are no longer God's children? Does that mean God disinherits us, gives up on us? No, believes Paul. The nature of God's love is to continue to decide for us, to find ways of re-awakening us, of restoring the relationship. God continually chooses to love. So Paul talks about God's adoptive love.

We brought Kent home to be our son, and Shelley was born two months later. We began to learn over and over that the love that matters most is more of a choice than a feeling. The cute little children bring challenges, and the challenges become more challenging as they grow older, and as we discover our deficiencies as parents! I have thought many times that the adoptive love we had for Kent by choosing him as our son is exactly the same love we had to have for Shelley, our birth child. When it is no longer "fun," when we disappoint or hurt each other, when expectations are not fulfilled, when we go through the clashes and clangings of living together as human beings, the important thing is choosing to love when "feelings" of love disappear. Most of the time, those feelings have to do with our image of what we wanted another person to be or how we expected they should please us in some way. When that doesn't happen, the feelings that had to do with our own wants and needs get disappointed. We think we are no longer "in love." Thank God we aren't! What we as a culture call love is something else--ego-centeredness, co-dependency, whatever. It is when we come to the point of choosing to love this other person that real love begins to emerge. It is when we face the challenge of renewing and deepening our commitment to a mission that has become difficult or to the community when we get disillusioned, then we are at the threshold of loving with the love of God. It is love that chooses to nurture and sustain the relationship. It is love that nourishes our fuller personhood. It is love that can forgive, understand, reconcile, and empower. The love with which we have been loved, which we know in Jesus, becomes our way of life. And we choose it again and again.

God has blessed us in Christ with every blessing from every corner of the universe! God has chosen and called us in Christ, as though from the beginning of time, to be the people God created us to be, to live the life of love. And God has decided from the start to adopt us in Christ, to be sure that we know we belong to God in a love that is unshakable. Love that chooses to love. Only that kind of love can create and sustain our relationships, our community, our world. And that is why what we call the inward journey is so crucial. It is the way we pay attention to our own lives and our rootedness in God's blessing, God's having chosen and called us, and God's always choosing to love us again and again. As we give ourselves first to that inward journey, then our living, our outward journey, becomes the expression of that love.