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Peace, Sun Prairie
February 5, 2023
Epiphany 4

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

GOD CHOOSES THOSE WHO ARE NOTHING
TO SHOW THAT JESUS IS EVERYTHING

Halley had been practicing and practicing her piano piece for the fine arts fair – a prelude by Chopin. In truth this score was just beyond her capability, but it forced her to aspire, to strive to become better than herself. Even so, she still felt a little wobbly about it. She hoped the judges weren't too harsh. She sat through the two previous performances leading up to her own. Call it good fortune for her or bad fortune for her predecessors, but they didn't do so well. The first was a vocal solo, but the poor girl was stuffed up with a head cold. She valiantly struggled through her song but was nevertheless off pitch at times. Next was a clarinet. Somehow half way through the piece the instrumentalist seemed to lose his place and embarrassingly three times his clarinet squeaked. Whether right or wrong, Halley felt great relief. She told herself, all she had to do was get through her piece without any major flub-ups and she would shine!

This story serves as an analogy to God's purpose in whom He elects or chooses to save. God tends to save the flub-ups and the failures, more likely than the impressive. He does this so that His grace, His kindness, will shine. From this portion of God's Word in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, let's focus on this truth: *God chooses those who are nothing to show that Jesus is everything.*

A friend of mine had visited East Germany when it was still under the control of the USSR. While there he had been introduced to a group of teenagers. He asked them what career paths they hoped to follow when they got older. Their reply was, "What does it matter?"

I say this not to make some statement about the scourge of communism and the virtues of capitalism. Rather, this only serves to demonstrate that people in other parts of the world have a very different outlook on life from Americans. Here in America we're bred to believe that life is largely of your own making. Therefore we measure success and happiness very differently from people in other parts of the world. Perhaps no in other place on earth do people engage in celebrity worship the way Americans do. The super-successful.

And thus religion in America is often couched in the same terms. If you are successfully saved, then it must have been of your own making. You chose to accept Christ. You successfully turned your life over to Him. But that's not how Scripture talks. Even here in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 it does not say *you* chose to be saved; it says *God* chose to save people.

On what basis has God chosen to save people? Certainly not on the basis of anything in them. Listen again to 1 Corinthians chapter 1: *Brothers, think of what you were when you were*

called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

An ancient writer who lived a generation or two after the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians made this observation about the Christian Church: *A glance at these churches proves that the Christian faith wants and is able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children.* Contempt for Christianity especially from elite circles has not changed much to this day.

But here's the crazy thing. We're not going to refute it. We're not going to argue, "You're wrong! We're talented! We're smart! We're impressive!" That's not to say that we believers do not have God-given talents or accomplishments or brains. Nor does it mean we cannot express our appreciation for the remarkable gifts God has given to His believers. Nor does it mean we shouldn't strive to give God glory with the very best of our abilities. What it does mean is that we'd much rather allow ourselves to be regarded as nothing by the world and even in our own estimation.

But why this strange take on our own sense of self-regard? Because the more that I am nothing, the more Jesus becomes everything. It's like John the Baptist once said: "He must become greater, I must become less." In fact, that is God's design in whom He has chosen to save. God chooses those who are nothing to show that Jesus is everything.

Listen again to 1 Corinthians 1: *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* It is God's doing that I am a believer in Jesus: "It is because of him..." How do I know God has chosen me? My Baptism. In Baptism He called me by name and connected me to Christ.

And now that I am connected to Jesus, Jesus is my wisdom, my only wisdom. Why? Because Jesus and only Jesus restores me to God now and saves me to eternity. Jesus is my righteousness, my holiness and my redemption – the whole ball of wax. Regarding my relationship with God, my hope for rescue from this world and from death, my aspiration for true glory and significance, Jesus is the only thing that matters. When God chose me, He chose someone who was nothing, so that perhaps through me it will be most apparent that Jesus has to be everything.

Recently, you, Peace congregation, sent me and Pastor Arndt and several of our staff to a WELS Leadership Conference in Chicago. Thank you. We witnessed some of the finest presenters in our church body, individuals with impressive academic credentials, with finesse and profound experience and theological prowess. Very worthwhile. At the same time, an event like that can induce a sort of momentary mini-internal crisis: "Look at that amazing presenter younger than I! Gulp! What have I done with my life? How much of my time have I wasted?"

Sometimes it's not a fleeting moment of self-doubt. Sometimes it's a real, full on agonizing internal crisis. When it seems like I've failed my family or I've failed at life in general, when I can't avoid that I've failed my God, when I'm tortured by a nagging, pounding, internal voice: "What are you? You're a nobody? Who even knows or cares that you exist?"

Then I must tell myself that I'm glad to be a nobody. All the better if I'm a nothing. For that means Jesus becomes everything. And that is the very best way for things to be. I will gladly let that be my boast.

You see, it's not what I have achieved that matters, but what Christ has achieved. It's not whether I have been successful that matters, but that Christ was successful. It's not whether there is good in me or whether my time was wisely used that makes the difference. It's the fact that Christ is good and used every moment to win my salvation. It's not my contribution to the world by which I'm measured; rather I'm measured by the righteous life of Jesus. For in Baptism His life and my life became inseparably intertwined and everything that belongs to Him belongs also to me. He is my wisdom, my righteousness, my holiness, my redemption, my success, my glory and the proof that I matter. And He is mine through Baptism.

Therefore you see, God's grace shines all the more brightly when He saves a nobody like me because it becomes so evident that it had to be He, all He, entirely and in every which way He who does the saving. Grace is that He saves me apart from my successes and failures. He saves me in spite of me. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. In other words, God chooses those who are nothing to show that Jesus is everything.