“Not the Frozen Chosen”

Mark 8: 31-38

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Our JOY group—which stands for ‘Just Older Youth’—created Lenten jars this year. We dropped slips of paper with written scripture verses, prayers, and acts of devotion in a glass jar. Each day during Lent we draw out one slip of paper and use what it says as our Lenten intention for the day.

The first few days were lovely and admittedly easy: Pray for someone you know who is sick. Done. Pray for soldiers who are serving our country. Done. Day three was a bit more challenging for someone who, for example, commutes down Peachtree Industrial Boulevard and sees a car trying to merge in from Tilly Mill: *Fast from being first: let someone go first today*. Alright, alright, I’ll let you over. But not because I’m Southern. It’s because it’s Lent and I’m a good Christian.

On Monday, only five days into Lent, I encountered a serious problem. The slip of paper said *Fast from soda, coffee and other drinks. Drink only water today*. Look, just like you, I want to follow Jesus. But I’m a much better Christian when I drink coffee. Do I have to let coffee go to be faithful this Lent? I decided to go to where all deep theological problems are solved: I posted my dilemma on Facebook.

Thank you, Facebook. All responses were kind and clever. The comments from my pastor friends were especially passionate! A Decatur pastor offered wisdom: “Coffee helps you connect with God.” A pastor from deep in the heart of Texas said: “Coffee is the will of God.” From a Virginia colleague: “Coffee is straight from Jesus.” My favorite was the willingness from a pastor in this Presbytery to intervene on my behalf: “I rebuke this, in the name of the Lord!”

There are some things we don’t want to let go. Little things and big, important things. We should hold on tight to some things, sometimes. But things in this world are not eternal. Creation is constantly in a state of change. And to take on –or take in—something new, we must be able to let go.

Mary Oliver shares this wisdom in her poem *In Blackwater Woods*:

*To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal, to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. Let it go.*

Those of you with children are waiting for the obvious illustration of the movie *Frozen*, for which the hit song “Let It Go” was birthed. But we’re not going there today.

Let’s look at another type of frozen: the nickname we Presbyterians have been given and often deserve: God’s “Frozen Chosen.”

Let’s begin with the second word, *chosen. Chosen* is an important word when Presbyterians talk about God. Theology is talk of God. Presbyterians subscribe to a particular type of theology, Reformed Theology. While you can’t put your finger on exactly what we believe, here are five general principles of Reformed Theology.

First, above all, Reformed Theologians acknowledge the sovereignty of God. God is in charge. Second, we are faithful stewards of creation. Third, we seek justice by transforming society. Fourth, we live a covenantal life. And finally, we come to our word. Fifth, we are **chosen** by God for service and for salvation. That’s the genesis of “chosen” in “frozen chosen.”

(Rev. Jennie Sankey and I had an entire semester in seminary together that covered this one, single slide. If you think these points need more explanation, you’re right. It’s too much to wedge into one sermon, much less one minute of a sermon. But there was an excellent question posed last week during our congregational meeting about this exact subject, so I’m offering this slide. You can go more deeply into these ideas by picking up a printed copy of today’s sermon. At the bottom I’ve listed valuable educational links about Reformed Theology as a good starting point for study.)

So, back to today’s message. We’ve learned “chosen” of “frozen chosen” means we are God’s people, chosen to serve and chosen for salvation.

But what about “frozen?” You wouldn’t know it from the Cabaret previews we’ve been treated to these last few weeks, but we Presbyterians are typically not very demonstrative. We may get just a wee bit stuck in our ways. We’ve been accused of lacking passion. Hence, the nickname “God’s Frozen Chosen.”

Frozen Chosen is used as a collective noun to describe Presbyterians. But Mary Oliver’s poem is about action. She uses the verbs “love” and “hold” and finally “let it go, let it go.”

Here is an essential truth: our faith, our following Christ, our discipleship is a VERB. We are not part of a collective noun. We are not a single, unchanging, named thing. We are, individually and as a group, a VERB. We are in the middle of action: God actively loving us, our active response to that love called “ministry,” and our everchanging understanding of what it means to be faithful, to follow Christ.

If you, as an individual, are not changing and growing, if you are frozen, *you are not living.* Take a look at your life and ask yourself, “Am I frozen? Or am I following?”

Maybe you are in a co-dependent relationship: you say the same things, over and over, and nothing ever changes. Your relationship is frozen in an unproductive loop.

Perhaps you’ve been the leader of a group for so long that you’re leading by habit instead of a place of joy. Your inspiration is frozen.

Or you care so much about appearing to have it all together, you don’t want to try anything new. You’re frozen in your routine.

Your work, what you do, completely defines you. Your entire identity is limited to what is written on your Linked In profile. You’re frozen into a one-dimensional person.

When you take a careful look at the way things are in your life, and consider how things could change, it’s scary. But we have to let things go. Let go of something that may at one time been very, very good, but now needs to change. So you can move forward. So you can follow.

“But preacher, that’s HARD. I’ve always had lunch with that one toxic friend, what if I cancel and she talks badly about me? I’d rather stay frozen than be the focus of gossip.” “Preacher, what if I step down from my stale role as leader of that club and no one misses me? I’d rather stay frozen than risk being just one of the guys.” “Preacher, what if I try that new thing and I fail miserably? I’d rather stay frozen than fall on my face in front of everyone.” Change is scary.

Mark 8: 31: “Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again. …And Peter took Jesus aside and began to REBUKE him.”

Can you imagine Peter’s words, hissing with fear and anger at his rabbi, his teacher? *Jesus! You are the conquering messiah! You are my friend, my mentor! Don’t speak to us about challenges and trials and death. I like the way things are, I am comfortable with what I know and I don’t want to be a part of anything that HARD.*

A church can also freeze. Pleasant Hill managed to grow and change under the same pastor for many, many years. And we have more than held our own as we’ve searched for our new head pastor, implementing new programs and worship practices.

But, as every gardener will tell you, *we must beware of the late Spring freeze.*

Starting May 3rd, Rev. Katie Day’s first day of leading worship as our new pastor, let’s keep our ears open. Listen for the first time our new pastor asks a question and the answer she receives is, “We’ve just always done it that way!” Let’s notice when words like “can’t” and “haven’t” and “won’t” creep into our vocabulary when we’re discussing a new vision of ministry here at PHPC. Let’s not ice over. Let’s be sure we don’t mimic Peter, who likes things just the way they are and doesn’t want to pick up his cross and follow Christ in this new way.

Oh, Peter. We have the privilege of reading today’s scripture and knowing the happy ending. You and I know the **Risen** Lord, Jesus the Christ, Conqueror of Death, the Prince of Peace. But Peter was simply standing in front of his Savior. He saw all that he loved was at risk. Of course he was scared! Of course he wanted to freeze things just as they were. This is the same Peter who, in Mark 9, will witness the transfiguration of Christ beside Elijah and Moses and want to build shelters so they could all take up residence, and keep things exactly as they are at that moment.

I don’t mean to be rough to Peter. He was a wonderful disciple. He was also human. We, also human, can learn from Peter’s mistakes.

Disciples embrace change. When you follow, you encounter a change in scenery, a change in company, and therefore a change in yourself. The only thing that remains unchanged is *whom* disciples follow. Jesus the Christ.

We have nine brand new members of this church: our recent confirmands. Bennett, Gianna, Annaliese, Jack, Shaw, Katherine, Anya Lucia, Levi, and Olivia, you wrote faith statements, “Faithments,” to express your beliefs, your understanding of God, and how you choose to “connect faith with everyday life.” I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is well, the good news: that through the mercy and love of Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven. The bad news is really good news, too. Your Faithments are not complete. They are even now, at this moment, under revision. You, as disciples, just as every other person in this sanctuary, are growing and changing. Your faith, your beliefs, your connection to Christ is not frozen but always evolving. God is acting in each one of us every moment of every day.

We are reformed theologians. That is to say: reformed and always being reformed. Faith filled and open to being changed. We must let go of what we cling to so desperately so that we can embrace the new. So we can follow. So we can disciple. So we can BE a verb.

Verse 33: “…[Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

It’s not all fun and games when you set your mind on divine things. It impacts how you live your life. The cross we bear can be heavy. We may suffer when we choose to move from the comfortable toward Calvary.

Verse 35: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

It’s not all fun and games. But oh, to follow Christ, to be a disciple is challenging. And exciting. And glorious. Glorious!

To follow is even better than a fresh hot cup of coffee.

Amen.

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Resources gathered by Explorations church class leader Rev. Jerry Dean Weber:

A primer on the Reformed Tradition and includes a bit about essential tenets of Reformed Theology [written by the National Network of Presbyterian College Women]:

<https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/youngwomen/pdfs/nnpcw_reformedtradition.pdf>

Themes of Reformed Theology:  <https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/vocation/pdf/themes_of_reformed_theology_and_polity.pdf>

"What we Believe" further explicated: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/theology/>