

“Whose Idea Was This?”  
John 15:12-17  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
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Nineteen years ago this fall, I started my first position as a senior pastor and head of staff of a new church. I had spent the previous 5 ½ years as an associate pastor, and because of that good experience—  
with a wonderful church and an excellent mentor—  
I felt called to try my hand at being the Senior Pastor  
of another church.

So about 5 months into my new call as Pastor at that congregation, it was Easter.

My first Easter in which I was in charge of what would happen in worship, my first Easter to preach, and all that...

I was excited, and I had an idea.

You know how, at Easter, there are all the lilies up front when you come in?

And the paraments are white?

And the sanctuary just kind of sparkles with anticipation of Easter morning?

It was the same at the church I was serving, but I had this idea that we needed to show—visually show—the transformation from Good Friday to Easter.

To help people see the movement from DEATH...to LIFE.

So what I wanted to do, and explained to the ushers and some elders that I wanted to do, was have the congregation walk in on Easter, and everything would not look like Easter.

It would still LOOK LIKE Good Friday.  
 No lilies to be seen.  
 Black cloth covering the communion table.  
 The pulpit and lectern bare, stripped of any paraments.

And everyone would be shocked, and surprised, and wonder what was going on.

And then we would start worship, and the congregation would sing, “Jesus Christ is Risen Today,” all the ushers and some elders would bring in the lilies, and drape a white cloth on the communion table, and white paraments on the pulpit—and we wouldn’t have a stone to roll away, but it would still be dramatic.

It would still be a visual transformation before everyone’s eyes...whole new world, the entire congregation would be filled with the surprise and the wonder and the beauty of Easter.

So that was my idea.  
 And we tried it.  
 And what do you think happened?

Instead of wonder and transformation, it just looked like CHAOS.

All these ushers rushing around to try to get the lilies all up BEFORE the first hymn ended...some of them almost running into one another trying to get the paraments off and on again. Who’s doing what? I thought you had this...

The effect was not, ohhhhh!!  
 The effect was: **whose ideas was THIS??!**

They were a very gracious church, and they rolled with it.

But I do remember one person who approached me afterward, he had been on the committee that called me to that church...and he said, “Ben, the whole bring-the-lilies in thing during the first hymn...was that your idea?” he asked.

“Yes, yes...that was my idea. We’ll do a normal Easter next year.”

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“Whose Idea Was This?”

That’s not just the question that the congregation I served was asking all those years ago on Easter Sunday.

And it’s not just the title of our sermon today.

It’s also a question that I’d like you to consider when it comes to church.

When it comes to Westminster Presbyterian Church.

**Whose idea was this?**

We’ve spent the past 10 weeks exploring the vision of Westminster. What’s that vision? Open Minds Open Hearts. And we’ve discussed the 5 core values, the pillars that we use here to measure our decisions: hospitality, generosity, justice, imagination, joy...

We’ve talked about 3 goals for the coming year:  
Connect. Serve. Grow.

And one of you came through the line after worship this fall, and you had the insert to the bulletin in your hand, and you said: Ben, this is really good.

Vision, values, goals...it's all right there.

Now I didn't have time to say it then, but I'll say it now:

Anything good that comes out of this naming of our vision, naming five pillars that guide our decisions, so that our actions and values and vision will all be aligned—it didn't just come from me.

I am indebted to my splendid colleagues with whom I work, they helped begin this discussion with me about our vision and our values well over a year ago. I am indebted to them for helping me think about the vision of our church in a more intentional way.

And...I'm indebted to conversations with the leadership on the Session.

And...any good that comes of this in the future—and I believe that there will be good that comes of this...it is also because of you.

Because of your hospitality.

Because of your generosity.

It's not like I dreamed those up as NEW VALUES for our church.

You already had them.

I have seen them in you.

And part of what this sermon series has tried to do, is point out examples of the ways that Westminster lives our pillars out.

Heck, even putting it all together on the bulletin insert...that wasn't my idea. One of you came up to me after worship at the end August, and said, "We need this in some form that we can see it every Sunday!"

A team effort, right?

## Whose idea was this?

I'd like you to think about this question, not just in terms of our vision and our pillars and our goals.

I'd like you to think about that question in terms of you.  
In terms of your presence here today.  
Whose idea was it?

Is your being here, at Westminster—is that your idea?  
Did you choose to be a part of this church?

On the one hand, sure.  
You decided at some point to visit this church.  
To join this church.

Of course, it was your decision.  
But was it your decision?

According to our text for today, according to Jesus, the answer...  
**is no.**

You and I did not decide to be here.  
We were chosen.  
Chosen by Jesus to be here.  
Do you remember what Jesus said?

“You did not choose me but I chose you.”

In other words, being God's Church is not ultimately our idea.  
It's God's idea.  
It's the Holy Spirit at work in each of our lives, bringing us together, in ways that we never could have done on our own.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Let me pause right there, and ask:

What is like to be chosen?

What does it feel like...to be chosen for something?

When we talk about being chosen, we often speak of it in terms of anticipation, as a fun thing, a rewarding thing!

Chosen...to play on the football team in high school?

Chosen...for the lead role in the play?

Chosen...to receive an award that you were not expecting?

Chosen...for the promotion?

Chosen...for the new job?

Being chosen can be the greatest affirmation in the world.

And not being chosen...can feel like the biggest disappointment in the world.

But if we're talking about Jesus—about Jesus choosing us to be a church of Open Minds Open Hearts...well, being chosen means something a bit different.

It's not about reward for hard work.

It's about responsibility to do God's work.

It's not about success.

It's about service.

It's not so much about going up.

It's about going down.

It's about doing things that sometimes...

we don't always think we can do, or want to do,

or have the time to do...or have the gifts to do...

But we step forward and do it anyway, because Jesus—chose us!

I'll never forget Will Willimon, retired bishop in the Methodist church, native of Greenville, still teaching at Duke—he once told a story from his days as a bishop in Alabama.

One of the churches that was under his jurisdiction had a food ministry for people experiencing homelessness in the city of Birmingham.

And one morning, Willimon went to the church and he went to the breakfast that they were serving, and he stuck his head in the kitchen.

He saw someone there who he was surprised to see.

It was a well-to-do gentleman he had met a few weeks prior, someone from another church, a suburban church, a very affluent church.

This person was in the kitchen, washing the dishes.

Willimon said, “Hey, glad to see you here. Have you always enjoyed working with people who are homeless?”

To which this man replied:

*Who told you I enjoyed this? Working in a hot, stuffy kitchen in the morning before I go to work—and lots of these people who are here, they're suffering in ways I've never seen before, and I can't do anything to get them out of the place that they're in, they've got problems way beyond my ability to help. I don't like this one bit!*

Willimon was stunned.

And he replied:

“Well then, why are you here, at 7 in the morning, washing a bunch of dirty dishes in a place you clearly don’t want to be?”

To which this man replied:

**“Why am I here? I got put here by Jesus...**

**How did you get where you are?”<sup>1</sup>**

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Whose idea was this?

Whose idea was it for all of us to gather here at the corner of Augusta Street and West Augusta Place on Sunday mornings?

Not our idea.

Not even the charter members’ idea.

It was God’s idea.

God has chosen us...and it doesn’t have anything to do with our qualifications. Nothing to do with our resumes, or whether we’ve ever gotten straight As.

God has chosen us for a very specific purpose: to love.

That is the reason for our existence.

That is the reason God created God’s Church.

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

That’s the purpose.

That’s the point.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the story told in Willimon’s book, *Who Will Be Saved?*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.



To love one another—meaning anyone who is a part of your church family, anyone who is friend to you here or a stranger to you here...

How many of you enjoy talking with friends when you come to church on Sunday morning?

Good, good.

And how many of you make a point, when you come to church, of greeting someone you don't know, getting to know the people you don't recognize, and befriending them so that the connections in our church will grow?

Do it once a month.

One unfamiliar face once a month will mean 12 new friends at the end of the year.

That's a good way to love one another.

And love not just the people in this room, right?  
But also the people outside this room.

In our first text for today from Matthew, Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is...you remember his answer:

To love God with all your heart, mind, and soul.  
And to love your neighbor as you love yourself.  
That's the point of being chosen by Jesus...to love.

Jesus has chosen you to share, to show, to spread—  
the self-giving, sacrificial,  
do for others before you do for you,  
bless your enemy even when they don't care  
and it's at a great cost to you...

kind of love.

That is what Jesus has chosen you for!  
 How does that feel?  
 Do you wake up every day thinking, Oh boy!

I get to forgive someone I don't feel like forgiving today!  
 I get to serve someone I don't really want to serve today!

### **How does it feel—to be chosen by Jesus?**

We've spent the past 10 weeks exploring the vision of our church.  
 Open Minds Open Hearts.  
 And I'm excited about the direction that Holy Spirit will lead us as  
 we live that vision out.

AND...I hope all of us remember that there is a bigger picture than  
 this vision.

The bigger picture is love.  
 That is the reason we exist.  
**The point and purpose of being God's church...is love.**

Not Hallmark love.  
 Not sentimental love.  
 But Jesus love.  
 You know what Jesus love is, right?

Jesus love is...

Love the Pharisee even though I dislike the Pharisee kind of love.

Love your co-worker who is really getting under your skin by  
 going the extra mile kind of love.

Love the world by hanging out with the poor, giving voice to the voiceless, standing with the shamed and the shunned and the ignored kind of love.

Now, if that doesn't feel good, I don't think Jesus cares!

Of course, you and I could opt out.

We can opt out at any time.

We can say...

I don't want to love people who will be difficult to love.

I don't want to forgive people whom I don't feel like forgiving.

I don't want to give money to a church community that might sometimes conflict with my politics, Jesus.

I don't want to give my time and energy and effort to something that might lead me to the cross instead of a comfortable retirement, Jesus.

So yes, we can choose to opt out.

We can say no to this kind of love...any time we want.

But before you do that...I want you to think about the reason you are here today.

Was it your choice?

Or was it God's choice?

Whose idea was it?

I believe you're here because God has chosen you.

And God has chosen you. And you. And you. And all y'all.

(That's biblical, right? That's a biblical saying...all y'all.)

Each of you has something, some gift to share, some gift given to you by the living Lord—a gift that will contribute to the radical love of

Jesus spreading and growing...a gift that is essential to the vision of Westminster, Open Minds Open Hearts.

That gift may be one reason why God wants you here.  
At this time in your life, what do you think that gift might be?

(Amen.)