

“The Privileges and Responsibilities of Chosenness”

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

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Many of us have seen the Capital One commercial featuring Charles Barkley. Its message is about how easy some decisions are, and to illustrate the point, the Round Mound of Rebound, as he used to be called, a retired NBA star, stands on an outdoor basketball court with a group of kids about ten to twelve years old. They are picking teams, and to no one’s surprise, Charles gets picked first. “I knew I’d get picked first,” he says with a knowing smile, and one would certainly hope so. But even though the decision is as obvious as the situation is absurd, all the kids look on with disappointment. It’s great being the one chosen but not so great when you are not chosen.

This tension permeates the stories of chosenness in scripture like the one we have read today from Genesis 17. Abram and Sarai, and in turn their descendants, are chosen by God first in Genesis 12 and now in Genesis 17 when a formal covenant is established. It’s great for them but not so great for the Canaanites whose land will be occupied. To this day, there is a certain uneasiness when Jewish friends are referred to as the chosen people. When I have talked with rabbi colleagues about this, they have responded in a couple ways.

First, look where it has gotten us. For what have we been chosen? Persecution and oppression? Second, Abram and Sarai are chosen, yes, but in Genesis 12:4, God promises not only to bless them and their descendants, but through them to bless all the families of the earth. They are chosen not just to revel in their special nature, but to be a channel of God’s blessings for others. It brings to mind a saying of Jesus recorded in Luke 12:48, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.” Perhaps Abram and Sarai should read the fine print on this covenant. Perhaps this is part of why Abram falls on his face in silence — not just because he is filled with awe and gratitude, but because he realizes the responsibility he is assuming.

Of course, it may be that chosenness, at least when it comes from God, is a bit like a grandparent practice. Many grandparents will tell a particular grandchild, “You are my favorite,” and that grandchild will believe it, but the grandparent tells all of the other grandchildren the same thing... and it is true, they are all favorites! Surely this is how God’s favoritism works — we are all loved and cherished! Genuine parental favoritism among human beings is a harmful enterprise, as the Joseph narratives in scripture make clear. Surely God does not engage in such a practice. God’s love is not limited. More divine love for you does not mean less for me.

But no matter how we understand the concept of chosenness, Abram and Sarai are chosen by God for a special covenant relationship which contains privileges and responsibilities. They are singled out for favor, but not because they deserve it. Indeed Abram, who becomes Abraham, has a long list of failures, including one just after today’s reading. Abraham laughs at God’s promise of a child with Sarah because he is nearly 100 years old and she is 90. It does seem preposterous, but this is God, after all. Abram’s, and later Sarah’s, laughter, seem a bit like Peter’s rebuke of Jesus when he talks about suffering and death in today’s reading from Mark. How do you argue with the person you recognize as Messiah? How do you laugh in God’s face? But we do, we all question and doubt. Abram and Sarah do.

So, they are chosen not because they deserve to be but as a sign of grace. Once they are, however, they are given the responsibility of being a source of blessing for others. That too will be a work-in-progress, something at which they will often fail. Ishmael and his descendants are blessed but not through Abram and Sarah, in spite of them. But it is a work-in-process, which is to say there is progress on the journey, and ultimately, they will prove faithful to God.

All of this strikes me as being not only very familiar but very much like what we experience with the New Covenant in Christ. We are singled out for favor, not because we deserve it but as an act of pure grace. But in response to that experience of grace, we are called to a life of service and love. We are called, Jesus says, to deny ourselves, take

up our cross, and follow him. Both sides of the message are critical and each side depends upon the other to have any meaning.

It begins with grace, unmerited favor, something we do not earn or deserve. A mentor of mine, Glenn Hinson, has illustrated grace with a story from his childhood. He was fishing with his grandfather and he was catching nothing until suddenly he hooked a fish and reeled it in. But he hadn't actually hooked it. His grandfather had pulled off a little sleight of hand. Yet he had the sense that he did it! I did something similar for Ian in a pond in Warren County when he was about two years old. I cast a long way and hooked a sizable bass, and he reeled it in. But in every telling of the story, he caught the fish. Such is grace.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris says that Jacob's vision of a stairway to heaven with angels moving on it is an experience of grace (pp. 150–151). Jacob deserves the worst at this point in his life. He has deceived his father Isaac, son of Abraham, and cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance. He is sleeping in an isolated place, vulnerable and alone, with his head on a stone that he may be keeping close not just to sleep on but to fend off his brother, should he come looking for revenge. But rather than giving Jacob what he deserves, God gives him a glorious vision to which Jacob responds with worship and adoration. "Surely the Lord is in the place," he says, "and I did not know it!" God doesn't just let him off easy; God sees beyond Jacob's scheming and recognizes something good and noble. That is grace.

Some of us begin with high self-esteem, either because we are affirmed as children by parents and others close to us, or because we just have a good, deep-down sense of who we are. Others struggle more, seemingly throughout life, no matter how much we accomplish, either because of emotionally damaging childhood experiences, being told we don't matter or count, or for some unknown reason, perhaps something in our brain chemistry. But the truth is all of us are a mixed bag of qualities, yet God sees the good in us, and the way we experience the deepest sense of self-acceptance, the kind that nothing can take away, is in the mysterious embrace of God's all-encompassing love.

French Abbe Michel Quoist says that an experience of God's grace is like a warm kiss deep inside our soul that we will never forget (*With*

Open Heart, p. 145). In Flannery O'Connor's short story "The River," when young Bevel arises from the waters of baptism, he is told by the preacher, "You count now." This boy who comes from a dysfunctional home, who has never thought he has mattered, is told that he counts (*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, p. 38). In baptism we all count. In God's eyes we are all precious. That's grace. It is an unforgettable divine kiss deep inside, and it is essential that we experience this not only so that we will know we are loved but because knowing we are loved is prerequisite to loving others authentically — for their good, not ours.

Once we experience grace, we are called to extend grace to others. With great privilege comes great responsibility, but not only that — those who experience grace in an authentic way want to share it with others. Denying self, taking up a cross, and following Jesus on a path of suffering love is not a penance to pay for a ticket into eternity. It's what people loved by God want to do.

On an individual level, I think of an episode of *Call the Midwife* in which a younger midwife notices the look of disappointment on the face of an older midwife when a former nun says she has chosen another colleague to deliver her baby. This midwife asks the older midwife if she will be her maid of honor at her wedding. The older midwife objects, saying that younger friends would make more sense. But the bride-to-be insists, partly because they really are dear friends, and partly because she realizes how much her friend needs affirmation right now.

It is an act of kindness, an act of grace, the kind I see our people extend all the time. We are sensitive enough to realize what a friend needs and so we take them a meal or write them a note or just show up and make sure they know they are not alone. We care enough about people around us that we try to help in the ways we can — with food and shelter, with clothing and gifts at Christmas, with a willingness to stop and speak on the street or simply wear a mask. Each of us extends kindness and grace to others, in some ways no one else may know.

On a social level, I think of something Franciscan Richard Rohr wrote. "Now is no time for an academic solidarity with the world. Real solidarity needs to be felt and suffered. That's the real meaning of the

word ‘suffer’ — to allow someone else’s pain to influence us in a real way. We need to move beyond our own personal feelings and take in the whole (as quoted by MaryAnn McKibben Dana in *The Christian Century*, February 10, 2021, p. 23).” To allow someone else’s pain to influence us and move beyond our feelings — it sounds like empathy, feeling what another person feels, and it sounds like the kind of self-denial Jesus talks about in Mark 8 — not a denial of self-worth but a refusal to allow personal needs always to transcend the needs of others.

If we are ever to extend love on a social level, in regard to matters like racial injustice, this kind of suffering love will be required. To enable others to experience justice, we have to move beyond our feelings of lost privilege, which is what racial equality often feels like to those who have been treated better by society. No one likes to lose anything, but if what I have is at someone else’s expense, how can I claim to be a follower of the One who gave up everything for others and be okay with this? For everyone to be treated fairly, those who have had an unfair privilege may have to have less. It is a way of extending grace to others, part of the responsibility side of our covenant with God.

The covenant Abraham and Sarah experience with God and the New Covenant we experience in Christ are similar and they are both a bit like getting our driver’s license and the keys to a car for the first time. It is a great privilege to be able to drive, a wonderful freedom that is most fully appreciated by those who lose this freedom later in life. But with this freedom comes incredible responsibility. Every time we get behind the wheel, we are taking not only our own life into our hands but the lives of others as well. If we seriously thought about all of the possibilities, we might not drive at all! But we do, and it is worth it.

Our covenant relationship with God is something like this, only in a much more significant way. The grace we know in Christ is the most incredible privilege we will ever experience! God’s love is liberating and empowering, it is all embracing, it is enough to sustain us through anything we might yet encounter! But in response to this incredible gift, we have a responsibility to extend grace to others. It seems overwhelming at times, but it is worth it, it is always worth it.