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Choosing Sides

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Do you remember the last time you had to choose a side? Although I am not sure it is a common practice anymore, there are many adults who have childhood memories from their playground days when captains for teams were selected and then those team captains picked who they wanted for their team. For some of us, this is a happy memory, because if you were at all athletic or popular or, if you were particularly fortunate to be both, then you were one of the first ones chosen. If you were not so lucky, then the memory of constantly being the last one chosen, standing there hoping a captain would have pity on you, can be a terribly painful one. And if that is the case for any of you, I apologize for bringing it up, especially if I unintentionally hurt you. I was that kid, the last one chosen, the one no one wanted, so I know the pain well.

But being the last one chosen led me to question the practice of picking sides. It helped me recognize sports like baseball and kickball were not my forte, and that was okay. I recognized there were other things I wanted to do, other skills I wanted to work on, and so I learned not to take being chosen last personally.

I can also remember the last time I was asked to choose a side. And it wasn't for anything as benign as an elementary school kickball game during gym class. It was when I was in seminary, and the side I was being coerced into choosing would have more lasting consequences. I entered seminary in the fall of 2004, and graduated in 2007. For those of you who don't remember, that was a time of division in the Episcopal Church. A division blamed on the ordination of the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, but in truth it was a division that had started many years before that when the Episcopal Church began to change, to change its liturgy to reflect modern language, to expand its hymns and music, and to embrace minorities like women, people of all races, and members of the LGBTQ community and accept that God calls all people to ordained ministry as deacons, priests, and bishops and the church needs to make room for that diversity. However, as is always the case when something new is happening, even when that something new is of God, there are not only those who will resist the changes, but will outright reject the changes. Change like that can be perceived as a threat, as someone losing something important to them, making them not only sad, but also afraid and angry.

This fear and anger caused a tension that was quite palpable at the seminary I attended and graduated from. Not only because I was a woman seeking to fulfill my calling from God, but because other seminarians from other dioceses threatening to leave the Episcopal Church were also in attendance. Many of them were not sure what to make of the changes, especially when their bishops were against them. Many students felt they needed to be loyal to their bishops, after all, all deacons and priests take vows of obedience to our bishops, and it can take some time for us to work out what that looks like in our ministries and in our lives.

As the impending split from the Episcopal Church came closer to being realized, some of my friends and fellow seminarians told me I couldn't, "sit on the fence" (in their words) any longer. They told me I had to choose a side. Of course, what they all really meant is I had to pick their side, because they couldn't help but be certain that theirs was the right side, the side history would reveal as the winning side.

I prayerfully thought about their ultimatum, because it didn't feel right to me. I went to the Bible, and read passages like our Gospel passage today, where Jesus talked about bringing division (for that is usually what swords do) to earth instead of peace, and reflected on what Jesus calls those of us who follow him to do in situations that are about division. And I remembered those painful days on the playground, not being chosen, and I began to wonder if there is another choice. Maybe there are sides besides the ones I was being asked to choose between. And I wondered if one of those sides was Jesus himself. After I realized this, anytime anyone asked me which side I was on, that of the breakaway group or the Episcopal Church, I told them I was on Jesus' side. He was the one I was following.

My friends never asked me to pick sides after they heard my answer. I let them make their choices, and for some their choice worked out well, for others, it has brought them disappointment and pain. But that part is for them to tell, as it is their story, not mine. Today I am still connected with many of these friends, we still share our joys and worries and pray for each other regardless of what side we ended up being on. So, there is still unity, even though there was division, in our case that unity is our friendship, respect, and Jesus Christ.

I share these memories with you today because it seems our country is in a time of division, and that division can be painful. In some cases, this division has negatively stressed or impacted families, long time friendships, and in some cases even work relationships. People feel betrayed, hurt, maybe even threatened. And, much like my seminary days, there is resistance and rejection.

I'm not going to talk about sides and which side is wrong or right. I'm not nearly clever or smart enough for that. But I am going to attempt to lift up the division, because Jesus himself talked about bringing division to the earth in our Gospel reading today. This is a far cry from the Christmas message the angels sang to the shepherds on the hillside when they proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace, goodwill towards all people." Where did that message go? Why would Jesus say he came not to bring peace, but division? Why would he then list painful family breakups? Isn't following Jesus supposed to make everyone get along?

Well, I can't answer for Jesus himself, but according to what the author of Matthew's Gospel has him say, apparently not.

The words of Jesus in our Gospel today are a continuation of a long set of instructions Jesus was giving to his disciples, charging them to go out among the People of Israel and do works of healing and renewal so that they might recognize the Messiah is in their midst. But the arrival of the Messiah was not something everyone was prepared for. It was a change, it meant things were changing, and remember Jesus wasn't the warrior leader many wanted in their Messiah, and he was rejected by quite a few towns he and his disciples visited. Jesus' words may have been a warning to his disciples that what was true for him, will be true for them, as they will bring the same change. And remember, a change, even a good change, even a change that is from God, is still a change, and as those of us who attended the Lenten series on resiliency might remember, change can threaten the status quo, it can force us out of the comfortable and the known, and that can cause fear and anger, which can lead to division.

And maybe, that is okay. Or at least, it is what it is. Maybe we can't always stop the divisions from happening, because that is part of how human beings process and respond to change. But maybe, perhaps, there is an opportunity in the division itself. Maybe, perhaps, there is something of God waiting to engage us in the heart of division, maybe division can lead us closer to God.

That is the argument Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, teacher, and lecturer made in the book she co-wrote with former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams called *Uncommon Gratitude, Alleluia for All that Is*. In their book, Sister Joan makes the observation that division can be an opportunity for anyone to stop and think about what choice they are going to make and how they are going to make it. She argues that it is a time when a person might step back from the situation, like I did when my friends wanted me to pick a side, and look around to see if there are more creative options. Divisions are also opportunities, Joan writes for us to reflect on who we are, what we really believe, and what we are willing to stand up to and

stand up for. You see, divisions are usually about power and who has it, who wants to keep it, and when we can see that, it can make us think about how we feel about that power, and if we choose, we can choose to say no to the power play. And perhaps that is where God is, waiting in the midst of the division, of the conflict, shining like a light, and reminding us we don't have to play the game of choosing sides, because we are made in God's image, which means we can choose Jesus instead.

That doesn't mean we can isolate ourselves, or opt out of life. Far from it. I am still connected and still care about my friends, even if I sometimes disagree with their choices, and they disagree with mine. There is still a chance for community. It just means life isn't always as simple as choosing sides.

Perhaps following Jesus means we are challenged to look at divisions differently, to look at them through the lens of the Love of God, to try and understand the root cause of the division, to have compassion on the people involved, to trust our beliefs and where they come from, to be willing to be challenged, to hear all sides, and to stand in love with our beliefs, not pushing our own way, but showing that there is another way.

Perhaps now more than ever there is a need to show the world there is another way, and perhaps that is what God is calling the church to do; the larger national church, dioceses, parishes like Church of the Good Shepherd, and us individuals who follow Jesus. Perhaps now in the time of so much division, we can show another way to live with our neighbors, especially the neighbors who voted differently than us, or who have different priorities or values than us.

Sure, it's going to be challenging, and we might not know exactly what that will look like in our daily actions and conversations. And that is where it might be helpful to remember today's Gospel has Jesus tell his followers and us that we are loved and valued by God, so much so that God knows the exact count of the hairs on our heads, which means we aren't alone as we attempt to traverse this time in our country. Perhaps this reassurance that God values us and the persons we might disagree with can give us the courage to look differently at division, and when we feel pressured to pick sides, to have the courage to step back, to look for where God is, and choose to follow Jesus, even if that isn't the choice someone who cares about us wants us to make, to forgive, and choose to keep showing God's Love as a way through division to the other side.