

"He Came First to His Own"

(A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter)

Text: Acts 3

Lectionary Texts: Psalm 4, Luke 24:36b-48, 1 John 3:1-7

Subject: Don't turn your back on the appeal from God through His servants.

Desired Response: Say "Yes" to the appeal.

How To: Read the Bible to know what God asks of you and, then, respond.

How Long: Start with at least one session this week.

Sermon in a Sentence: "When we understand what God asks of us, we, His dear children, wholeheartedly and positively respond."

Worship Theme: "Through His written Word, God often asks us to do certain things and waits to see how we will respond."

When I look out at you dear ones seated here this morning, I see a wonderful group of top notch individuals. I don't know very much about sports, but I think I understand that, for a young man or young woman entering a professional sport to find himself or herself among the first draft picks is a really good thing.

Based on that, I think of each one of you as a "first draft pick." We're a small enough group at this point that I am privileged to know quite a bit about most of you. So, I am very confident in my claim that each one of you belongs as a "first draft pick."

But, what happens when we find out that we're not the first one chosen? I've had that experience in my life. All through elementary school, junior high school, and high school, I was always the last one picked any time an organized sport required two captains to pick their respective teams. They were fully justified in choosing me last. I was terrible at sports—terrible. I deserved to be picked last. However, at the time, that truth was little compensation for my shame at always being chosen last.

As an adult, in my much younger years, you would probably be surprised to know that I played for many seasons in a church softball league. The captain of our church team was much kinder to me than the captains in my growing up years. But, I was always sent to right field—as I've mentioned before in a previous sermon. Why? Because the teams we played against had no left-hand hitters. Thankfully, it was only on the rarest of occasions that a ball was ever hit in my direction.

It's just not as much fun when you don't get picked first—when you're not a "first draft pick."

Nearly fifty-five years ago, in the summer of 1963, I was working for radio station WESB as an engineer at the McKean County Fair. We had a small booth in the center of the main building of the fair. A typical day at the Fair involved arriving quite early in the morning, setting up the broadcast equipment, connecting to a leased telephone line, testing to make certain the signal made it back to the main studio in Bradford—about 20 miles away—and playing LP records whenever the talent—the announcer—was not interviewing someone attending the Fair or talking with one of the exhibitors or vendors.

On this particularly warm summer afternoon, the talent, Gene Williams, had wandered off, most likely to get a cold drink. Suddenly, a very distraught woman appeared at our booth insisting that I come with her. It seems that Gene was supposed to be judging the apple pie-making contest. But, Gene was nowhere to be found.

Reluctantly, not knowing what else to do, I put on a very long cut of music and followed the woman to an exhibit area a short distance away where five ladies proudly stood behind their apple pies waiting for me to judge which one was the best.

Now, I must tell you that I really like apple pie. And, I must also tell you, with no hidden prejudice in my opinion, that my mom made the best apple pie I had ever tasted. Nevertheless, I took a bite out of each of the slices the ladies had placed in front of their pies. Lady No. 3 had clearly made the best pie. It was very tasty with just the right balance of sweetness and tartness. The crust was melt-in-your-mouth perfect.

Lady No. 5's pie was very good, too. And, she clearly deserved the second place award. Lady No. 1 had a fine pie and she took the third-place spot.

When I announced my choices, Lady No. 5 exclaimed loudly with disgust, "Second place! Second place! Who in the world wants to win second place!"

You see, we all want to be first. But, that doesn't always happen in sports, in pie-making, or in life.

Our Scripture text for today is a sobering reality for all of us Gentile followers of Jesus. Let me share it with you. I'm reading from Acts 3:1-26:

¹ One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. ² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.

³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. ⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. ⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

¹¹ While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. ¹² When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶ By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

¹⁷ "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.

¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰ and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.

²¹ Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. ²² For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. ²³ Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.'

²⁴ "Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. ²⁵ And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'²⁶ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

One of the false narratives that has persisted over the years is that Jesus chose some men of low estate, ignorant fishermen among them, to serve as His disciples. Make no mistake about it, even lowly Jewish fishermen had received the education afforded them by their religion. They could read and write. They understood the Hebrew Scriptures. And, they were waiting with eager anticipation for the coming of their Messiah.

You can clearly see in this passage the wisdom and knowledge that fisherman Peter had acquired as a small boy in the synagogue. You can also see that in the three and a half years he spent at the feet of Jesus, he learned well the lessons that Jesus taught.

It is important to note that the message of salvation through faith in the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, came first to God's chosen people, the Jews. Jesus **is** the long-awaited Messiah. He is the holy One of Israel. He came to fulfill the covenantal promise that God had made with the children of Abraham.

A familiar passage in the Gospel of John, chapter one, reads:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Jesus came into this world to bring salvation first to the Jews and then to the non-Jews. So, we Gentiles are second choices—but, we are chosen nonetheless. Praise God that this is so.

In fact, we of the Reformed Protestant faith believe that before the foundation of the earth, God chose us to belong to Himself. Then, in due season—at a time of God's purposeful choosing—He sent the Holy Spirit to each one of us whom He has called to reveal to us the great gift of salvation that He has given us through His precious Son, Jesus. The entirety of Romans 11 talks about us Gentiles being grafted in to the line of David.

That is to say that we have been joined inseparably with God’s first-chosen people, the Jews. So you see, we have become “first draft picks” after all.

The purpose of God sending His Son to earth was to give humankind a clear path to the forgiveness of sins that would lead to eternal life. Peter makes that clear in our Scripture passage for today. Note what Peter says in Acts 3:19-20.

¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,²⁰ and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.

The message of Christ is a message of repentance. And, repentance is a step beyond mere forgiveness—even though forgiveness is of critical importance. Repentance literally means a turning away from sin.

In some ways, repentance is the hardest thing for us to do. Why? Because frankly, we like some of our pet sins very much. We’re fond of them. We feel good about them. They help define us.

When I see certain political or entertainment figures on the television screen, I tend to shout at them. I tell them that I don’t like them and that I don’t want to hear anything they have to say. That’s a sin! It’s my sin and I like it very much. It’s the way I have to state my displeasure with the policies, or pronouncements, or lifestyles of these individuals. I feel a bit more righteous and self-assured when I trample these disliked people under the weight of my harsh words. But, it’s a sin. I need to ask God to forgive that sin. And, I need to turn my back on that sin.

“That doesn’t seem like much of a sin,” you might say. But, you see, it reinforces a feeling of dislike, even hatred, for these people who I interpret as attacking my preferred way of life. I could and should express my disagreement with them in a way that is not disagreeable.

God wants us to confess our sins, receive His forgiveness for our sins, repent of our sins, and—when we have harmed someone else—make restitution for our sins. That’s the message that Peter shares with the Jews and with us Gentiles, as well.

What I’m saying in a sentence: *“When we understand what God asks of us, we, His dear children, should wholeheartedly and positively respond.”* Again: *“When we understand what God asks of us, we, His dear children, should wholeheartedly and positively respond.”*

What I’m suggesting that we do, as followers of Jesus—beginning today and continuing for every day the rest of our lives—is to start saying “Yes!” when God asks us to do something.

For example, in the passage today speaking through the voice of Peter, God is asking you and me to repent of our sins. He wants us to literally turn our backs on our sins.

If there is something or someone who is leading us into sin or promoting us to sin; if there is some place where we find ourselves moving toward sin; if there is some want or wish that ends up with our sinning to achieve that want or wish; if there is some movie or television program or book or magazine that prompts us to sin; if there is some thought that, when we dwell on it, leads us to sin; God is asking us today to turn our backs and walk away.

In the passage read earlier from Psalm 4, King David writes:

⁴ Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. ⁵ Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord.

Likewise in the Epistle Reading for today, we find these words of the Apostle John:

⁴ Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. ⁵ But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. ⁶ No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

⁷ Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

You may have a best friend whom you really like and with whom you have had a long-term relationship. But, when you're around that person you find yourself more likely to sin. God wants you to walk away.

You may have a relationship with a boy or girl, or with a man or woman, that really makes you feel good. But, that relationship puts you in a place where you are more likely to sin. Unless you are bound to that best friend in marriage, God wants you to walk away from that relationship.

Repentance is hard. It's very hard. It's harder than hard. But, it is an absolute necessity if we want to grow in our faith and draw closer to God through His precious Son.

So, how does this repentance business work? It's really quite simple.

We begin by spending time in God's written Word each day. As we read the Bible, certain passages of Scripture will be used by God to point out the sins that have taken hold in our own lives. The Holy Spirit may nudge us as we are reading. Or, the Spirit may nudge us later in the day when we sin a particular sin, calling to our minds what we read earlier.

At that moment, we should ask God to forgive us, knowing that He will. And, we should ask God to give us power through the Holy Spirit to turn our backs on that particular sin.

It's important that we don't get discouraged if we find ourselves repeating the same sin. It takes a lot of discipline to stop the habits that many sins form in our lives. But, every time we pray and ask God to forgive us and to empower us to repent, He will do so. Eventually, we will begin to think about that particular sin before we do it. It's at that point when we can turn away before we sin and begin to experience victory over this habitual sin.

If you are sitting here with us today and thinking, “This doesn't really make sense to me. I'm not that kind of person. I don't sin that much. In fact, I can't even name one sin that is a habit in my life.” Please hear my words spoken to you with as much love as I can muster: You are lying to yourself. Every one of us sins many times each day. Why? Because we inherited the nature to sin from Adam.

Remember, in that famous scene in the Garden of Eden where Satan came in the form of a serpent and tempted Eve, she was deceived. But, Adam sinned willingly. It was that nature to willfully choose to disobey God—to sin—that has passed down to us all. We will always struggle with sin until we move from this life to our eternal home at the feet of Jesus.

But, in the meantime, we can do whatever we can to repent, to walk away, to eliminate certain sins that have a hold on us. And, as a result, lay claim to the freedom from the bondage to sin that Christ won for us on Calvary's cross.

Why in the world would we ever make such an effort?

Because it's the kind of thing that a "first draft pick" does. And, because: "*When we understand what God asks of us, we, His dear children, wholeheartedly and positively respond.*"

Amen.