

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

We like having choices;

Lots and lots of choices.

For example, next time you walk down the shampoo aisle,

Take a good look at how many choices we actually have.

Who actually needs 50 different types of shampoos to choose from?

And that's not counting the conditioners; that's at least another 50 or more.

Do we actually need a 100 different choices for washing our hair

when there are millions of people around the world who have to use the same
bar of soap to wash their hair and their clothes?

Why do we need all these choices?

Yet, we're so used to them, that if someone tried to take them away,

We would have a fit.

We have actually come to think that it is our constitutional right, and perhaps
our God-given right, to have choices.

So how would you feel if I told you that when it comes to God you have no choice!

Jesus said it...

You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Part of our sin is that we think everything begins with us.

I choose whether or not to believe in God.

I choose when to pray and when not to pray.

We don't even consider that

God might have made the first move.

For that's exactly what Scripture tells us.

God always makes the first move.

God is the initiator of every connection.

The truth is:

We have no choice in the matter.

God loves us. Period....

So we better get used to it.

Now when we hear this news, our heads might say

"well that's good news, isn't it? What could be bad about being loved?"

But too often, it's a different story with our hearts,

The truth is that many of us don't know how to be loved.

The truth is that many of us are not very good at being receivers.

Our Tanzania Partnership team consists of eight of us from LCR who will be traveling to
Tanzania in August.

A few weeks ago, Joanne Carlson, our synod staff person for mission partnership, came and gave us a little orientation.

Joanne emphasized that we are going not just as a tourist group or even as a congregational group.

We are going as representatives of the synod and of the ELCA church-wide expression. And because of that we need to understand the philosophy of partnership.

The main purpose of partnership is building relationship.

We are going to Tanzania not as givers, but as receivers.

Too often middle class Americans think that we have more to offer to the Tanzanians because they are financially poor in comparison to us...

We assume that they need our money. They need what we have to give.

However, part of our learning process will be how to go into this relationships as equals,

Realizing that the Tanzanians have just as much to offer us as we have to offer them.

Joanne told us about 10 times that we are going to Tanzania to be "receivers"

And you should have seen the faces of our group members...

What? We're not going to take them money?

We're not going to do work for them?

We're just going to be "receivers"?

Then what's the purpose of our trip?

The next week, I met with Susan Pursch who is the coordinator of our synod's efforts for Sekuco...

If you remember, SEKUCO is the new Lutheran University which our synod has helped to initiate.

Susan has been to Tanzania several times,

And she said to me, "your people are going to be blown away when you get there and realize that the Tanzanians already love you before they meet you."

"they really love you already...you will have no choice in that"

They love you because you are part of the synod, church, the Body of Christ.

And their love for you will be genuine and real.

That's what it's like with God. We have no choice.

God already loves us.

Before we were born, God loved us.

And in the waters of baptism, God sealed that love

. today we will witness a baptism at the 11am worship.

and (Lindsey and Dan, you might have brought Daniel here after much thought and conversation, thinking that this is your choice.

But the truth is: they (you) have no choice...Daniel belongs to God.

God loves him with a deep and eternal love.

And today, God will publicly seal that love in him.

God loves each of us.

God loves us when we do good.

God loves us when we do bad.

God loves us, because God has **chosen** to love us.

Not because we deserve it.

But because love is God's nature, God's essence.

So perhaps our first step in loving others is learning how to be loved.

Learning how to truly receive love.

Jesus said, "love one another as I have loved you"

And how has Jesus loved us, "with the love of one who laid down his life, quite literally, for us.

So perhaps our first step in loving others is learning how to be loved.

How would our lives look different if our view of ourselves mirrored God's view of us.

A Women's prayer book had a confession of sin that read:

God help me to believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is.

When I first read it, it caught me off guard:

But when I thought about it, it was so comforting to know that
regardless of our brokenness,

Regardless of our weaknesses,

God's sees us as beloved..... as beautiful.

because God sees us from the perspective of eternal love.

And just as God loves us, we are called to love one another.

But perhaps in order to do that, we need to first learn to receive God's grace in our own lives.

Now we need to unpack the word LOVE here.

Jesus calls us to LOVE one another.

We are not necessarily called to like one another.

MLK...thank God that Jesus say didn't say "like your enemies. Because it's hard to like someone who bombs your house and endangers your family"

Instead, Jesus says "love your enemies.....love your neighbors.

The word love here...is agape.

In the greek language there is more than one word for love.

Eros is affectionate love....a feeling. .

Philos is a sibling type love. We love because we have family ties.

But Agape is different

Agape is God-love.

is not about emotions or feelings,

it is not about family loyalty,

it is about action.

Regardless of how we feel about each other,

We are called to ACT in loving ways toward one another.

We are called to serve one another and pray for one another.

Jesus tells us that if we follow his commandments, we will abide in Him.

He is telling us “act like I act, and you will stay connected to me;

By our pattern of behavior, by repeating his actions, Jesus will make us more and more like him.

Yet, at the same time,

Love doesn't mean we can or should do whatever we want.

Love does not negate the expectations of Jesus' commands,

Instead, Love undergirds them.

Because we love Christ, we WANT to follow his commands,

Not out of fear of punishment or abandonment,

But because we love the one who gives the commands.

So we don't have a choice about being loved and accepted, but we do have a choice in how to respond to that love.

We can choose to pray for one another.

We can choose to remember that the person sitting next to us is a Child of God.

We can choose to speak the truth in love.

We can choose to serve our community

We can choose to make time for study of the Bible.

We can choose to help our neighbor

We can choose to hold one another accountable

We can choose to reach out to those who have lost their jobs

We can choose to give our resources to God's work.

We can choose to be examples of Jesus' commandments.

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

God loves you.

How will you choose to respond to God's amazing love and grace.? Amen