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## Unlikely Choices

John 6:56-71

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on August 23, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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There are unlikely choices made all the time. If we just survey the presidential candidates, you might think some of them are unlikely choices and very scary options in the twilight zone of presidential campaigns; I'm not naming any names. Some incoming students chose Duke over Harvard and to some that sounds absurd and very unlikely. But you made that unlikely choice while some of you thought it was highly unlikely that Duke would even choose you and you're still trying to figure out what you're doing here. But unlikely choices are made all the time.

Take Pinar Yoldas for example. She is a Ph.D. student in art, art history, and visual studies at Duke and she plans to build an architectural structure that would stand about 50 feet tall in a major city with serious air-pollution problems like Los Angeles, Beijing, or Bogota. The structure would have a mechanism to filter hard particles from the polluted air, turn them into ink, and funnel the ink into a container at the base of the structure. And what will she do with that ink? She plans to give it to calligraphers, thinkers, and poets, and ask them, "What would you write with this ink that is literally the air we breathe?" This is an unusual, unlikely choice for a research project but it won her a Guggenheim fellowship.

God hasn't won a Guggenheim but God works in mysterious and unlikely ways. Take the Ephesians passage for today as an example. To fight against principalities and powers one takes up an armor of God, wears a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, a helmet of salvation, carries a shield of faith, and wields the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word, and we are encouraged to pray. This is a strange way to fight a battle, a nonviolent way. We like using military weapons and guns and knives. Violence appears to have the victory in our day. But God always makes some unlikely choices.

This is what we've seen throughout biblical history—unlikely choices. David, a young, handsome, shepherd boy, used a sling shot and one stone to take down the feared Philistine giant, Goliath. Mary was a virgin but gave birth to the Son of God. A man was blind from birth and Jesus "spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes"(John 9). That wouldn't be our first choice for a remedy but that mud, after being washed away from his eyes, gives the blind man his eyesight back. Unlikely means chosen by God.

Then for Jesus to talk about eating his flesh as the bread of life, making the body a part of the spiritual life seems odd too. In John we see the convergence of the spiritual and material world when Jesus, the Word, became flesh making the Incarnation and embodiment a means to salvation and not a hindrance to it. This suggests that we are to be more immersed in our embodied selves to understand our incarnate God and not attempt to escape from our physical lives and selves. An unlikely way to become more spiritual is to welcome the physical.

We can't handle these unlikely maneuvers of God. This is why some disciples are offended and eventually bail on Jesus. We can't handle what God is up to a lot of the time, especially when it comes to people. It's one thing not to accept his teaching on the eating of his flesh and his offer of life but it's another thing when you can't accept his choices for disciples. Who Jesus chooses can get us bent out of shape many times. Judas was a chosen disciple and what I find interesting is that the

lectionary left out *this* part of the story in verses 70-71. I'm an inclusive dean so I had to include the following verses: "Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.' He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him." I guess the lectionary team didn't like those verses, didn't like Judas, but what I've learned is that it isn't always what or who is included that is significant but what or who is excluded that sends a message. Judas is ignored perhaps because we can't always handle the people Jesus chooses. Jesus makes it clear that he chose Judas; he chose a devil, an adversary of God, to be his disciple. "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." That means there's hope for us—the blue devils!

God has always chosen unlikely people to do God's work. Moses wasn't eloquent and was slow of speech and slow of tongue and tries to make those so-called limitations the rationale for not being called, but God chose him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. Jeremiah claimed he didn't know how to speak either and was only a boy but God chose him as a prophet. God chooses people we might think have nothing to offer, subverting what it means to be ready to serve God and able to make a contribution to the world. There was a man living among the tombs possessed by an unclean spirit in the region Gerasene and no one could restrain him with chains but Jesus heals him, clothes him in his right mind, and makes him a preacher to tell others what the Lord had done for him. Shall I go on? And then there's Judas.

We may see God's choices as horrible ones but they may represent the divine help needed in any given moment although they may not be our choice. We tend to go with the likely characters anyway, upholding a politics of respectability and acceptability even in the Church's life and mission. We don't go with the disheveled or the homeless, the tax collectors or the prostitutes, the so-called devils of society. We might want to totally ignore the devils among us or people we think are devils, including "the kids who die," to use the words of poet Langston Hughes:

Kids will die in the swamps of Mississippi...

Kids will die in the streets of Chicago...

Kids will die in the orange groves of California...

All kinds of kids will die

Who don't believe in lies, and bribes, and contentment

And a lousy peace.

Of course, the wise and the learned

Who pen editorials in the papers,

And the gentlemen with Dr. in front of their names

White and black,

Who make surveys and write books

Will live on weaving words to smother the kids who die,

And the sleazy courts,

And the bribe-reaching police,

And the blood-loving generals,  
And the money-loving preachers  
Will all raise their hands against the kids who die,  
Beating them with laws and clubs and bayonets and bullets  
To frighten the people— For the kids who die are like iron in the blood of the people...

We let kids die because they are little devils to us; we think they are Judas incarnate when in fact we might be the ones betraying them—we might be the Judas junkies. But somehow we've sainted ourselves and forget our own sin so we let them die—die in the streets, die in prison, die in classrooms with inadequate resources and skilled teachers, die because we would have never chosen them like Jesus because they don't have the pedigree, the family background, the looks, the network, the polished language or appropriate clothes.

We like the powerful and mighty but God specializes in the unlikely by choosing what is foolish, moronic, to shame the wise and by choosing what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chooses faulty, frail, fickle, finite misguided misfits. The truth is that disciples of Jesus have issues. We're peculiar. We're weird. Just look at us! We're not perfect. Being a disciple doesn't mean that we don't make mistakes. Judas makes a fatal one and suffers the consequences; he betrayed what and who could save him. The devil within will make us say like the apostle Paul, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Sometimes we are our own devilish nemesis. You might have heard that the devil is in the details. Well, the devil is also among the disciples too. "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil."

This is where we have to be careful because the one you call devil may actually be Jesus' disciple. Judas is an unlikely choice for a disciple but Jesus is an unlikely choice for a God. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity..." An unlikely choice to be the Word made flesh to live among us. Born in a barrio called Bethlehem to be our homeless, pilgrim God. God could have come in pomp and splendor, and royal opulence and circumstance but God came in humble beginnings among cattle and filth and had a hurtful cruciform ending, unlike anything we'd ever see or expect from the Savior of the world; this is what Desmond Tutu calls "divine incognito." An unlikely choice through unlikely means made by an unlikely God.

When we hear the disciples say, "this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" They are right because John literally says, "this *logos* is difficult" and earlier in John we learn that Jesus is the *logos*, the Word, made flesh, thus to accept this Word, this Jesus, this unlikely God, is what is really difficult for us because we can't accept what God does many times, even if it is for our own benefit. Who can accept it? Who can accept him? Maybe the question is, "Who has he accepted?" and perhaps the difficulty we have is with the fact that Jesus accepts us with all of our wounds, warts, worries, and devilish ways. Maybe this is hard for us to believe—that Jesus already accepts you. He already gave his life for you and the world and that may seem so unacceptable and unlikely, especially when it comes to devils.

But on this orientation Sunday, we have an opportunity to reorient ourselves to the unlikely ways and Word of God through Jesus Christ. He chose you and you probably think even as you look around, these are some unlikely choices. But God doesn't only choose you like the rest of the devils

of the world, God may be calling you to make some unlikely choices this academic year—in terms of friendships or classes you take or extracurricular activities or how you use your time for service projects, or what you do to encourage your own spiritual growth or how you change your attitude and behavior—and those choices may not be popular and embraced by the majority; remember, many disciples bailed on Jesus but Jesus never bails on us. God's way is not the majority's way; it's the unlikely narrow way. So whatever God chooses you to do this year, don't bail on God when it gets tough, tiresome or troubling. Choose the foolish and unlikely because it may be a sign that you have chosen rightly and wisely.

A Los Angeles Times syndicate once reported about an incident on a wet and miserable morning in Ohio. Ray Blankenship was making breakfast when he looked out his window at the open storm water drain that ran alongside his house. What he saw terrified him – a small girl being swept down the drain, and further downstream, the ditch disappeared with a roar underneath the road. Ray ran outside and raced along the ditch, trying to get ahead of the little girl. He hurled himself into the deep, churning water. He surfaced and was able to grab the child's arm. They tumbled end over end. Within about 3 feet of the drain going under the road, Ray's free hand felt something protruding from one bank. He grabbed a hold of it and held on for dear life. By the time the fire department arrived, Ray had pulled the girl to safety. Both were treated for shock and on April 12, 1989, Ray Blankenship was awarded the US Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award is fitting but Ray was an unlikely choice to be saving anyone in the water. He was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew because Ray couldn't swim. He was an unlikely choice but God's right choice. Amen.