

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 19
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Astounding love, lavish grace

—Isaiah 5:1-7

Why did God do it?

Why did God choose Israel? Out of all the nations, tribes, and peoples of ancient times, why did he select the twelve tribes of Israel to be his chosen people? They were not a great, important, influential empire; they were shepherds who were made slaves in Egypt. They were not eager to listen to God's promises and follow the LORD God; they were filled with doubts and unbelief. After God delivered them from slavery and brought them through the Red Sea on dry land and rescued them from Pharaoh's army, they were not filled with overwhelming gratitude; the praise on their lips quickly faded into grumbling, murmuring and complaining. They didn't follow God with a grateful heart and a joyful spirit; they were stiff-necked and rebellious. As soon as they had the chance, they traded in God's glory for a golden calf. And these were not one-offs. These were representative of a repeating pattern of rebellion and mistrust and idolatry and disobedience that went on again and again. Why did God choose Israel?

The short answer is: Because God is God, and God abounds in love. Whenever God pours out his kindness on someone, there's always the temptation to look for some reason why that person deserved God's kindness, and that's wrong. No sinful human being deserves God's kindness. God pours out his mercy, his kindness, and his love because that's who God is: He justifies the wicked, he says to sinners, "Follow me!" and he adopts wretched people into his holy family and makes them holy. It's all about God—God who is abundant in love and lavish in grace.

The Prophet Isaiah spoke to God's people over 700 years before Christ, at a time when God again had to rebuke the Israelites for their rebellious, wicked behavior. The LORD tells us the allegory of the vineyard: *Let me sing for my loved one a song about my loved one's vineyard. My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile ridge. He dug it up and gathered the stones out of it. He planted it with the best vines. He built a tower in the middle of it. He also cut a winepress into it. He expected it to produce clusters of sweet grapes, but it produced only sour grapes.* This is a picture of what God did for Israel. First, he chose them, adopted them and called them his Chosen People. He poured out his abundant love for them, as he led them through the wilderness for 40 years, as he brought them into the Promised Land, as he drove out the pagan nations before them, as he settled them in a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. This is the LORD's vineyard, the little, special patch on earth that God tended and cared for with all his mercy and goodness.

And God had a very specific reason for doing this: This Chosen Nation was selected to bring about the fulfillment of the promise of a Savior. The Messiah, the Chosen One from the Chosen Nation, would come from Israel, specifically from the tribe of Judah. God did something more: He gave Israel his Law—not only his Ten Commandments on tablets of stone—but all of the ceremonial laws that kept Israel separate from the nations around them. God's laws were the wall around the vineyard that protected the vineyard from being trampled and corrupted by the pagans. God said, "Come out from them and be separate. Touch no unclean thing, and I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters" (Isaiah 52:11; 2 Cor. 6:17, 18). They were separated from the pagans by what they ate. They were separated by circumcision. They were separated by whom they could marry. They were separated by their worship. Israel was *different*. God placed them at the crossroads of ancient civilization so that everyone passing through Israel could see God's abundant love in action. Israel was to be a shining beacon among the nations. This was the people that God formed for himself, that they might declare his praise! (Isaiah 43:7).

But in response to all his mercy, what did God get? Sour grapes! In response to all of God's kindness, Israel turned its back on God's abundant love and wandered off like a lusty stallion sniffing around after false gods. Israel practiced injustice, greed, idolatry. Burning incense to false gods. Worthless fruit! So God asks the question, "Where did I go wrong? What more could I have done?" *So now, you residents of Jerusalem and you men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard that I have not already done for it? When I expected it to produce clusters of sweet grapes, why did it produce sour grapes?* And how did God respond? For centuries, generation after generation, he kept on pouring out his mercy. When we say that the Bible is a love story, here's a vivid example of God's love: He continues holding out his love and calling Israel to repentance. "Turn back! Turn back to me!" The LORD says. God's patience is extraordinary, but finally God called for destruction. *Now, let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will take away its hedge, and it will become a pasture. I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled down. I will make it a wasteland. It will not be pruned or hoed. So briars and thorns will shoot up. I will also command the clouds not to pour rain on it.* The instrument of God's judgment was Babylon. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and led the people off into captivity for 70 years. He'd did not cast them away forever; he preserved a remnant, so the line of the Savior could continue.

So why does God tell us these things? Scripture says, “These things were written for our learning” (1 Corinthians 10). Learn from the ingratitude and the disobedience of the Children of Israel, so that you don’t fall into the same pit.

Let’s stop and reflect. Why did God do it? Why did God choose you to be his dear child in Christ? Was it because you are so cute or handsome or rich or had so much potential to be a great Christian? It’s tempting to think that God must have seen something in me that made him want me in his family. But that’s not true. God called you and chose you because God is God, and God is gracious. It’s all about him! That’s what prompted him to give his Son, Jesus Christ, to live and die for us. He did it because we were slaves to sin, poor, wicked, rebellious, wallowing in guilt, and we needed rescue. So he rescued us. Jesus poured out his life blood on the cross for our sins. He took upon himself our guilt and was punished for our transgressions. He came to you with the good news that he has destroyed death and the power of hell and opened heaven for us. He pulled us up out of the slimy mire of unbelief and disobedience, and he placed you on the pedestal of his mercy. He did it because of his abundant love for you, love that is so high and wide and long and deep that it defies comprehension. When we stop and contemplate what God has done for us, all we can do is stop and shake our heads and marvel at God’s abundant love and lavish grace. Our sinful nature still wants to rear its ugly head and lead us away from God, but in his mercy God continually calls us back to Jesus in repentance.

And now God gives us the privilege of producing fruit. There’s nothing special about living apart from God, lost in sin, steeped in unbelief, blind to God’s love—anyone can do that; that’s the default setting for a human being. But God has called you to a higher purpose. Jesus says, “You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

The fruit you produce is the fruit of a life devoted to God. We are thankful that God has rescued us from outer darkness and eternal fire through the life and death of Jesus, and now we want to live for him. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “The life I live in the body I live through faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” God says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.” The purpose of our lives is not to do whatever feels good for ourselves, to indulge ourselves. It is to search the Scriptures and learn the mind of God, to find out what pleases God and how we can live for God. Instead of complaining whenever things aren’t going our way, we can praise and thank God for his astounding love and his lavish grace. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Give generously to those in need; after all, God has given us everything we need for our bodies and souls. Don’t let unwholesome talk be found on your lips—cursing and swearing, grumbling and complaining, worldly language, gossip and slander—but only what is helpful for building others up. When your tongue wants to go rogue, say, “O LORD, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Psalm 51:15). Think of the love you have received from God, and reflect God’s love to others. Look for opportunities to share Jesus with those who don’t know him, so that the Spirit can use God’s Word and your testimony to bring more souls into his family. Work hard and diligently at your job—even when your boss isn’t watching—because you’re not just working for a human employer; you’re serving Jesus. You have been given the highest privilege that can be accorded to any human being. You are a Christian, a disciple of Jesus. His Spirit lives in you and works through you.

Why me? Why you? Why were we chosen to know Jesus as our Savior, to enjoy the privilege of his forgiveness, and to hold onto the hope of eternal life? It’s not because of us. It’s all God. It’s all because of his astounding love and his lavish grace. Amen.