

“Chosen and Called”

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

But we must always give thanks to God for you,
brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord,
because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation
through sanctification by the Spirit
and through belief in the truth.

For this purpose God called you
through our proclamation of the good news,
so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm
and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us,
either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father,
who loved us and through grace
gave us eternal comfort and good hope,
comfort your hearts and strengthen them
in every good work and word.

Chosen and Called

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

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I.

I'm going to try my best, but today's sermon might get a little weird. Then again, with Halloween still waning, you might be predisposed to a little weirdness. Perhaps you don't mind a little weirdness in your life every now and then. Perhaps there are even *some* of you who actually welcome a little weirdness. Well, if any of this is true of you, you've come to the right place today. The simple fact is, every Sunday here at the Church on the Park is a little weird, regardless of if you are aware of it or not.

For example, take today's sermon...please (for those of you who remember the old Henny Youngman joke). Today's sermon is wholly and completely because of Duncan Melville. I sat down to write the sermon Friday morning. As I stared down at a blank computer screen I realized my mind was every bit as blank, and that I had absolutely *no* idea about which direction to go with the sermon.

II.

So, I did what most preachers do, I decided to procrastinate. As I believe I've told you previously, I have an application on my computer called "Itsycal"; it is a nifty little thing that imports all the events from my computer's calendar program and expresses them in a drop-down menu by clicking on an icon of the day's date, "Fri, Nov 4" in this instance, which lives in the menu bar at the top of my computer screen. Without a clue as to how to start the sermon, I decided to procrastinate and, hence, I clicked on the Itsycal icon and noted that it was Duncan's birthday, as Itsycal imports the church Birthday and Anniversary calendars. While I take note of the birthday of everybody in the congregation, I took particular note of Duncan's birthday for two reasons. First, he is my daughter's father-in-law which is a good thing for her, and, second, in having a November 4th birthday, Duncan is a Scorpio, astrologically; which I find quite interesting knowing Duncan as I do.

III.

I know Scorpios. I am a Scorpio. In fact, I may be *the* stereotypical Scorpio. Duncan, however, is anything but. Duncan is a mathematician. If you know your astrological signs, you know that being a mathematician is about the least likely profession where you would expect to find a Scorpio. Just as I am one of a mere handful of Presbyterian ministers with a vowel at the end of their last name, I'd bet just about anything that Duncan is one of the very few mathematicians in the world who is also a Scorpio. (See, I *told* you this sermon might get a little weird.). As I pondered this juxtaposition in my procrastination, thinking about Duncan got me thinking about math, which got me thinking about numbers, which led me back to today being Pledge Sunday, which is the *one* Sunday of the year where numbers take center stage as the elephant in the church we only reluctantly talk about.

IV.

Nevertheless, I'm going to throw a number at you. You might want to write this down. Ready? 292,201,338. If you were to try and pick 5 numbers out of a possible 69 choices while separately, but at the same time, also trying to pick 1 number out a possible 26 choices, your odds of doing so would be 292,201,338 to 1. That is the likelihood of winning the Powerball lottery Grand Prize which, as of Saturday, stood at 1.6 BILLION dollars.

Prior to this sermon, I knew absolutely nothing about Powerball. However, a little sleuthing on the web along with articles from Forbes and The Wall Street Journal resulted in quite an education which I would like to share with you. First, the basics: Powerball is a two-drum, multi-state lottery game, where one drum holds 69 white balls from which 5 are drawn, while the other drum holds 26 red balls of which only one will be drawn and that red ball is called the "Powerball."

V.

As with all games of chance, and almost every form of gambling, the odds of winning the Powerball Grand Prize are long: 292,201,338 to 1, as I said. Unlike other forms of gambling, however, with Powerball the odds of winning never change; they are the same with each of the three weekly drawings which take place on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday evenings at 10:59 p.m.

However, what makes Powerball so attractive to the estimated 47% of the U.S. population who play the lottery (over 150 million people) is the easy buy-in: \$2 a ticket for a chance to match the 5 white balls and win 1 million dollars. Lots of people have \$2 in their pocket at any given time so, at that price, why *not* roll the dice (so to speak) given the potential payout? Moreover, if you aren't big on making important decisions, like which numbers to play, you can even have your numbers randomly generated for you.

VI.

But wait, it gets better. If you pony up the \$2 you aren't just in the running for the million dollar first prize, but other less lucrative prizes as well if you only match *some* of the white numbers; with the most common prize being \$4.

However, if you pay an *additional* one dollar, you also can try to select the number of the 1 red ball which will be drawn from the other drum; the so called "Powerball" which gives the game its name. If you pick the 5 correct numbered white balls, *along* with the numbered red "Powerballs" you can win the Grand Prize which, as I said, last stood at 1.6 BILLION dollars. Even failing that, if you correctly select the 1 red Powerball after matching *any* of 5 white, you will *double* your payout of any lesser prize.

As if that wasn't enough, if there is no winner the jackpot gets rolled over to the next drawing; which is how you can end up with a jackpot of 1.6 BILLION dollars. Given all of this, you can well imagine why 150 million people are persuaded to shell out \$3 dollars three times a week, or \$468 a year, to play Powerball; though most spend far more than that.

VII.

You have to be *in* it to *win* it, after all, and somebody *has* to win, so why *not* me? Even if you don't win, you can understand the attraction of spending some amount of time between each drawing pondering what you'd do with all that money. Which is really what you are buying when you play Powerball, or scratch-offs, or engage in any other form of gambling. Except, as it turns out, it really isn't all *that* much money. After taxes, any winner only ever clears about 47% of whatever prize. Beyond that, as the size of the jackpot grows so, too, do the number of people who decide to play; which increases the likelihood of having to share the prize with another or, more likely, many others.

When you consider the odds of winning, factor in the taxes, and take into account the likely split, the question that is begged is this: is it *worth* it? Even given the relatively modest investment of \$2 or \$3? The answer, of course, is a resounding “NO!”

VIII.

While you’re going to have to ask Duncan to explain the math to you, the fact is a \$2 Powerball ticket is really only worth about \$0.852, or just 43% of what you paid for it; and that is *if* you win. In short, Powerball is a bad bet. Quoting Ethan Siegel, Senior Contributor at Forbes magazine:

It’s long been said that lottery tickets are a tax on those who can’t do math. If you want to buy a Powerball ticket for fun, by all means, go right ahead. Just be aware that for every \$2 you spend, you’re donating about \$1.15 to whatever government programs that Powerball supports, and only betting \$0.85 on whatever you might win in an otherwise ‘fair’ lottery.

The one thing you *can* count on in playing the lottery is the same thing you can count on in life: if we win, any price is worth it; but if we lose, then no price is too low and not something any of us can afford.

IX.

Now I want to lay another number on you. Again, you might want to write this down. Ready? One.

Though we may greet the news with far less fanfare than the Powerball, our scripture reading for today from 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 is really the very same kind of announcement as the drawing to select the lottery winner. The Apostle Paul says: “God chose *you* as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose God called *you* through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

YOU are ONE who has been *Chosen* and *Called* by God. It is as if God reached her hand into the barrel of every person on the planet and selected YOU, seemingly at random, to be ONE to whom salvation, sanctification, glory and belief has been awarded. YOU are ONE of the Grand Prize winners! Congratulations!

X.

All too often we operate under the assumption that we are in worship this morning, or streaming the service today from our home, or reading this sermon at whatever point in the week that is our habit as a result of a choice *we* are making and the effort *we* are putting forth. However, that is only part of the story and, really, the lesser part at that. The other part of the story, the greater part, the *weirder* part, is that YOU are ONE who has been chosen and called to do so.

In God's lottery, you *win* it because God *placed* you in it. In God's lottery, every ONE of us wins the Grand Prize of sanctification and salvation. But wait, it gets better. In God's lottery, the whole host of lesser prizes are split variously among all the ONES; with each ONE of us being guaranteed to win some form of spiritual gift or another. Moreover, none of this relies on big decisions *we* have to make, as God makes them *for* us with an unmistakable intention which leaves nothing to chance or randomness.

XI.

Stretching the parable of the lottery a little further, through the Cross of Christ God has *already* paid our \$2; without a doubt, the easiest buy-in of all time. Given the potential payout of eternal life why would you *not* roll the dice (so to speak) that is the life of faith? So, we have our ticket, we are entered to win the Grand Prize; along with any number of other possible lesser prizes.

The only real decision *we* have to make is if we are willing to pay the additional ONE dollar for the metaphorical "Powerball" that doubles any prize we have *already* won? Or, as the Apostle Paul would put it, how will we respond to the love God has for us, and for the grace, eternal comfort and good hope that gives us? So, Pledge Sunday is an occasion to talk about numbers, as our financial commitment to the church is our *de facto* Powerball prize multiplier.

XII.

However, as we witnessed yesterday at our All Church Clean-Up Day, the commitment of our time, our energy, our effort to connect with others, our mission, our fellowship, our devotion to God's children and God's creation, and our resolve to undertake the journey of faith each and every day are all

prize-multipliers and force-multipliers which utilizes a weird kind of math where the odds are always in our favor and where the whole is miraculously exponentially more than the sum of our parts; a contest where everyONE who is in it WINS it. And you, my friends, are IN it; you are chosen and called. Because God so loved the world we are All in this together as the ONE body of Christ.

XIII.

Finally, I have here in my hand *two* Powerball lottery tickets. The first is from last night's drawing for a Grand Prize of 1.6 BILLION dollars. It is the first lottery ticket I have EVER purchased in my life. I will admit, that right after I did so I had a little bit of fun imagining what I would do with all that money; for a *few* moments anyway. I can tell you we'd have full-time, paid associate pastor on staff by spring, and a snazzy digital sign board outside the church faster than Bob Duda can tell you how many days are left until Christmas.

Now, it would have been a pretty cool story, to write a sermon about the Powerball, purchase a ticket for the first time ever simply as a sermon illustration and, then, actually end up winning (something, or anything at all). Unfortunately, this morning I checked the winning numbers: nothing, nada, zilch, null set, didn't even match one number.

XIV.

The *other* Powerball lottery ticket I have in my hand is my and Linda's pledge to our church's Stewardship drive. We buy one of these each year; always have, always will because you have to be in it to win it. Though every year it costs us a little bit more, it is a price we *gladly* pay. Why? Because we don't have to *imagine* what we'd do *if* we win, we do so because each and every year we *have* won; and the Grand Prize, no less: another year together with each ONE of you to be the body of Christ which is the Church on the Park.

Here we care for our neighbors and each other, not just proclaim but live out the Good News of Christ, bring compassion and love to a hurting world and, often in a weird way, have a WHOLE LOT OF FUN while doing so. As Linda likes to say, "Winner, winner, chicken dinner." Thanks to all of you who will join us in "buying a ticket," and for all the time, energy and love you give to our church. Amen.