

“The Gospel According to Pokémon”  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
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There’s a new fascination at our house, thanks to Netflix. It’s Pokémon, the Japanese anime series about animal-like creatures possessing special powers that are trained to engage in duels. Pokémon actually stands for “pocket monsters,” in case you were uninformed, which I was until recently. The main character is a boy named Ash who travels from town to town engaging in battles with other Pokémon trainers and champions. His favorite, and most powerful battling Pokémon is Pikachu, but he has several others as well. And this is how the battles work: Each Pokémon trainer pulls out the Pokeball and throws it in the air and calls out the Pokémon contained within. So, in Ash’s case, he throws the ball up in the air and says, “Pikachu, I choose you!” and out pops Ash’s best buddy. And when the battle is over, the trainer says, “Pikachu, return,” and the critter is drawn back into the Pokeball to rest and be regenerated. And that’s the part of the show I like best, because the trainer is always grateful for the effort the Pokémon has made, even in defeat. There’s no condemnation for failure. Now, what makes Ash such a great competitor is the bond of trust and teamwork he has developed with his Pokémon, something which virtually every other trainer notices when they battle Ash. His Pokémon will give their absolute best for him, because of the relationship he has cultivated with each one. Now, our kids may not recognize it yet, but I hope some day they will be able to see

that is this same kind of relationship the Apostle Paul is describing in the book of Ephesians, a relationship of trust and teamwork with God, forged through the work of Jesus Christ. In the midst of all the mysterious language of this passage is the same “I choose you,” and “Return” that makes the followers of Christ willing to give their best in the battles for the Kingdom of God.

When you boil down most human behavior to its most basic motivation, you find that motivation to be simply the desire to be loved, to know you have value and worth in the eyes of someone, anyone, God. I would suggest that you can take the most intricate of human relationships and at the bottom of them, is that primordial need for acceptance. This is not some Freudian analysis of the fragile human psyche, or a New Age take on self-esteem, or the product of some animator’s imagination, but rather, a logical explanation for why we do what we do, yours truly included. In behaviors as varied as the pursuit of money or fame, the crying of an infant, or the giving of an altruistic spirit, we can find the same motivation buried under layers and layers of personality, experience, family, and a host of other lesser and greater factors. We just want to be loved by someone. We want to be special, we want to be chosen. If you think you are above such petty and basic human motivations, come see me sometime and I’ll take you through an exercise which will prove it to even the most ardent skeptic.

With this a basis for our behavior, it raises the question of what our lives might be like if we could really accept and know that we were chosen, loved, accepted.

Would we behave differently with our loved ones? Would we choose a different career? Would we live differently as a result of knowing this rare gift? I suspect few of us will be able to answer that question for having fully acquired, or been granted, such a knowledge, but it seems to me that Christians should be above the median in this department based on what we know about our God who has loved us so much, as we are reminded in the Gospel of John that God gave his only Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life. People of faith *should* have a higher degree of the certainty of their lovable-ness than the general populace, and, it should follow, should behave in ways reflective of that knowledge. We are a chosen people, after all.

Listen again to Paul's awesome description of our relationship with God. "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." That we might live for the praise of his glory, telling and showing the world how great God is and how much God loves it.

Paul's bold statement on divine election sends a signal loud and clear that we are not random beings, accidentally collected as the church of Jesus Christ. God did not spin a heavenly lottery wheel to determine who would be chosen through Christ. And the people to whom Paul is writing are not people who know what it means to be

the chosen people; these are Gentiles who know little or nothing about God's covenant with the nation of Israel. But Paul knows. Paul knows that God promised Abraham that Abraham's descendants would be blessed by God, and these are, in Paul's eyes, the descendants of Abraham, brought into relationship with God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to God's will. For these Gentiles then, the notion of being chosen would have been a radical concept. Paul is saying to them, "Here's your good news: You too have been chosen and you too have been adopted as the children of God through what Jesus Christ has done."

Now, as ancient as those thoughts are, I am not so sure that we have quite as firm a grasp on the idea of our chosen-ness as we might or ought. It's true that many of the Reformation's founders of the faith were big on the idea of divine election, or choice, and it's true that as North Americans, we raised the idea to a fine but violent art in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, thinking that everything west of Long Island or Nova Scotia was the promised land and that the Indians were the Canaanites to be exterminated, but by and large, in these days, our understanding of being chosen by God as loveable, or chosen by God for a special purpose, is flagging. We are a lot more inclined to act as if we have, in fact, chosen God, instead of the other way around. And this loss of a clear understanding of the divine choice leads us to think that we are able to pick and choose our destiny as a people of faith, and *that* will lead us nowhere but into a mess.

Certainly it is a lot easier and more comforting to think that we can be the masters or captains of our own fate, to use the language made famous by the poem *Invictus*. There is no lack of encouragement for us to do this in our culture and our media. And at least we are doing *something* if we charge ahead, even if the charge isn't exactly in the direction God had in mind. It is much more difficult to leave in the hands of God something as slippery as God's will. It is much harder to wait on God's guidance than our own, and much harder to stay the course in the face of criticism or peer pressure or suffering when God sends us in a countercultural direction. Do not misunderstand me. I am not advocating a passive or fatalistic approach to our faith. But I am saying that what we have lost by failing to fully appreciate our being chosen by God is the ability to be tools and instruments in the service of God's purposes. We are far more comfortable using God as a tool for our own purposes, seeking that favor in ways which may or may not be healthy for us or the rest of the world.

A few years ago, Rick Warren's book, "The Purpose Driven Life," was pretty popular, and the popularity of that book reveals something interesting about us, namely that we really are keenly interested in our purpose in this life, in this world, in the eyes of God. We intuitively know that we have a purpose, and getting beneath all the muck and mire of our daily lives to find that purpose is an increasingly popular pursuit, the stuff of bestsellers I wish I had written! I confess to not knowing what Rick Warren has to say about our purpose but I do know what Paul has to say. According to Paul, the purpose for which we are chosen is this: that we "might live

for the praise of his glory.” Paul is clear when he uses that phrase twice, “the praise of his glory.” Now it seems to me that left to our own devices, not fully sure that we are chosen by God, acting like we have chosen God, we are not going to pursue such a noble endeavor or purpose as living for the praise of God’s glory. We are more likely to live for the praise of our own glory, or simply the validation of others.

So let’s go back to the Gospel according to Pokémon, and see what good news is there. You see, that conflict between the purpose of living for the praise of God’s glory and the ease of living for our own glory is the everyday battle our great Pokémon trainer in the sky sends us out to fight. Everyday, we are called to conquer the doubt that we are unloved in the world, or that we are purposeless in the world, and bring this message from Ephesians to the homeless, to friendless, and the lifeless, to a world that needs to know it is indeed chosen. And so, God throws us out there every morning with the reminder, “Dave, I choose you!” or “Lisa, I choose you!” or “Stacey, I choose you!” and turns us loose with the divine gifts each one of us have received. And we go out to do battle in the bond of trust and teamwork that God has established with us in Jesus Christ. And at the end of the day, victorious or defeated, exhilarated or exhausted, God says, “Dave, Lisa, Stacey, Return!” And we are once again enveloped in the divine grace and mercy that has been there since the beginning of the world.

It’s a challenge, right? How often can you look back at the end of your day and say to yourself, “Self, you did a good job out there today helping other people see

God's glory"? Because that is what living for the "praise of God's glory" is all about, helping, allowing, enabling ourselves and other people to experience the God who chooses against all odds, who has, from the very beginning, decided to lavish us with the riches of grace, to gather us up in the divine, to make us holy and blameless. And so when we live like we really know we are chosen, we live in a way that invites recognition that God is really pretty amazing after all. It's a challenge, but we don't go into that battle alone. Christ goes along with us. This church, and the church of Jesus Christ as a whole, is in dire need of people who live like they know God has chosen them, people who will invest themselves in helping others to know they are chosen. That, my friends, should be our fascination. May we all be open to the ways God is showing us we are chosen, that we might live for the praise of God's glory. Amen.