

When you plant a radish, you get a radish. But when you have a child, there's no way of telling what kind of child you're going to get. You may get a brilliant astrophysicist. Or you may get a toddler with other skills, like breaking windows or blowing up frogs. Good parents will love the child they receive, even if they do not always agree with the child's choices. If you marry into a family that already has children you choose the kids as well as the spouse. But normally God chooses children for families. And sometimes God's choice is challenging.

Throughout the bible, though, God chooses specific people for specific purposes. Abraham and his descendants became God's own chosen people. In the New Testament, Jesus chooses his own people. He makes a very deliberate call to discipleship, and people follow him. But not everybody approved of Jesus' choices.

The story of Matthew's call fits this pattern. The Pharisees are shocked that Jesus spends his time eating with tax collectors and sinners. But when you stop to think about it, who could Jesus have picked that was not a sinner? He could see beyond the sin, into the specific gifts each person had and into the basic goodness of the human heart. Others did not approve of his choices, and sometimes he became frustrated with his disciples, but he never stopped loving them.

This week the American bishops will have their annual meeting in Dallas. They had a lot on the original agenda, but almost everything else has been tabled so they can deal exclusively with the problem of priests who have committed sexual crimes against youth. All year we have been wondering why God chose some men to serve the church as priests. We may never know. But we do believe that God has a plan, and that somehow even this sordid chapter in the church's history will serve God's purposes. Still, there are times we'd like God to explain a little more.

When Jesus explains his choice to the Pharisees, he quotes a line from the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." It appears at the end of today's first reading in these words, "It is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts." In Hosea, God was complaining that people went through the rituals of offering sacrifice in the temple, but they did not practice love and mercy in their everyday lives outside the temple. For Jesus, if he gets a choice between those who strive to be merciful every day yet fail, and those who take part in worship but never try to be merciful, he'll take the merciful. There are many sinners who try to do what's right but make some mistakes along the way.

God chooses to love us in the same way a good parent chooses to love a child, no matter what that child turns out to be.