

Sermon Draft

Text: Ephesians 1:3–14

Sermon: Chosen

This Sunday's text begins the journey through Paul's Letter to the Christians at Ephesus. Paul's first stop in this important commercial harbor was at the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18–21), where he was encouraged by the Jews in the synagogue to stay. Unable to do so at the time, he left Priscilla and Aquila behind and promised to return.

After a brief visit to Jerusalem and a stay in Antioch, Paul began his third missionary journey by taking a path through Asia Minor to visit the churches there and arriving back in Ephesus. His stay lasted more than two years (Acts 19:1–10), making this his longest stay in one missionary location as recorded in Acts. Paul's final (known) personal contact with the Ephesian Church came as he was on his way back to Jerusalem, when he called the elders to come to him at Miletus. There he encouraged them and prayed with them (Acts 20:17–38).

The letter Paul wrote to the saints in Ephesus is dated to ca AD 60, about five years after his last personal contact with them.

He would later send Timothy there to combat false doctrine that had sprung up in the church (1 Timothy 1:3–7).

If you've driven by a school playground recently, you probably noticed it was empty, school's out for the summer. But in just a few weeks, playgrounds will again be teeming with boys and girls, climbing, running, sliding, playing games.

So, this morning let's go back to our days on the school playground. We're there, with the other kids, just playing around, when someone suggests a game of kickball. As usual the two biggest boys proclaim themselves captains, and they begin to choose one-by-one who will be on their team.

The fastest runners and hardest kickers are chosen quickly. Then the captains begin the painful process of trying to sort through the leftovers. No one wants the kid with the glasses because he misses every other ball that comes his way. Or the bow-legged girl because she can't run very fast. Or the scrawny kid because he's half the size of the others. And so, they aren't even chosen. They're left out. I was the kid with glasses who wasn't very athletic, not chosen.

Whether it's kickball or getting a part in the school play or being selected for a promotion at work, each of us wants to be chosen. Picked for the team. In this world, being chosen says something about who we are. It gives us a sense of identity. Of belonging. Yes, in many ways, being chosen means we're special.

But . . . if we're left out, it implies that, for some reason, we don't quite measure up, that we aren't good enough. In our society, where a person's value is based on worldly standards, it's easy to feel as if we don't belong. If we don't wear the right clothes, drive the right car, or aren't beautiful or smart, then in many ways we don't measure up. We aren't good enough. And therefore, we don't belong.

And if we apply that same system of determining value and worth to the Church, we quickly see that when it comes to things spiritual, we really don't belong here, either. We say in our Creed that we believe in one Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. But then we look at our lives and see that "saint" isn't the first word that comes to mind in describing ourselves. Each of us has plenty of moments we can recall when we've failed to live as God created us to live.

We look at his Word, his Law, and we can easily see how often we've broken his commandments. We may have a particular sin or even many sins we're so ashamed of that we've never admitted them to anyone. I've got those kinds of sins. And I think you do too. And our sins, like flaws in our personality or defects in our bodies, show us that we don't even belong in the Church. That we aren't "good enough" to be in God's presence, let alone be chosen by him.

But then we read the words of Paul in our text this morning from Ephesians:

He has "blessed us" (v 3), he "chose us" (v 4), he "predestined us" (v 5), (again) he has "blessed us" (v 6), he "lavished upon us" (v 8), and he "set forth" (v 9).

Notice that in each of these verses, it is God who is doing the action. He is doing the choosing. He is deciding who belongs to him. And on what basis is he doing the choosing? It isn't based on our actions or on how well we meet his expectations, because all of us sin and fall short of his glory. Instead, God chooses us, Paul says, to be "holy and blameless" in his sight (v 4). "In love," v 5, "he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ."

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (v 7).

Why are we chosen? God chooses us for one reason and one reason only. Hard as it may be to believe, it isn't my looks or my smarts or my good deeds that led him to choose me. Instead, he chose me as he chooses each of us based not on our merits, but on the merits of Christ, which are freely given to us. Freely credited to us. By faith, we are made his.

In Jesus, through our faith in his life, his death, and his resurrection, God loves us and chooses us. Therefore, we belong. He's the captain, and he has made us a part of his team, part of his family. And if we look in the Bible, we'll see story after story where God chooses someone to be his, not because they are so worthy, but simply because he loves them.

Look at David, a scrawny shepherd boy, who later in life would have a man killed in order to steal that man's wife. Still, God chooses him as king, and as forerunner to Christ. Or look at Paul himself. Persecutor of the early believers, hands covered with the blood of the first Christians. Still, God chooses him to be an apostle to the world.

Did God choose these men because they were so good? No, he chose them because he loved them and wanted them to be his.

And in last week's Gospel, we see the twelve disciples. Not exactly pillars of society, these men. Still, Jesus sends them out into the world armed only with his authority. And as the disciples go out, they do great things. Not because they are great people, but because they belong to him. The disciples returned they were really excited about all the things they had done: demons were cast out, the sick were healed. Jesus tells them that they shouldn't be so excited about the great things that they could do. They should rejoice instead that their names are written in the book of life. Rejoice, he says, because you belong.

It's not required, but I invite you to close your eyes just for a moment so that you can visualize a scene from the past. The distant past. A time, in fact, before time even was. In the vast emptiness before creation, God alone existed. And before he ever said, "Let there be light," he chose you. Paul says, ***"he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will"*** (vs 4–5).

Before we were—before anything was—God chose us. That makes us special, special to him. He wrote our names in the book of life, for he wants us to be with him forever. What a source of joy! What a source of comfort! To know that we are his, both now and forever, solely because of our faith in Jesus. We're that special to him!

Do you remember the Disney Pixar movie Toy Story? It centers on a group of toys that belong to a young boy named Andy. And of all his toys, Andy's favorite is a cowboy named Woody. How do we know this? Because Andy has written his own name on the bottom of Woody's foot. It was a mark of ownership, yes. But we also see that it is a sign of Andy's love too. His love for Woody. Later in the movie, the new toy, Buzz Lightyear, is also marked on his foot by Andy, showing that he, too, is loved. That he, too, belongs.

In the same way, we have been marked by God in our Baptism, having been claimed by him as his own possession. But as more than just a possession, for God's mark also clearly shows his love for us in Jesus.

Yes, at our Baptism, as we were marked with the sign of the cross on our forehead and over our heart, and then as water was applied with the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it shows us that we belong to God. As Paul writes, “*You . . . were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance*” (Ephesians 1:13–14).

Some of you may have noticed that at certain times in the worship service—during the Invocation or while receiving Communion I and other worshipers make the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross is a reminder of our Baptism. For as one remembers his or her Baptism, we are reminded that we’ve been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and therefore we belong to God.

Today, as you come to the Lord’s Supper, I want you to notice that each of the Communion wafers is marked as well. Marked with the sign of the cross. Take a moment to notice it and consider that mark. Let it remind you that through the sacrifice of Jesus, you also are marked, and you also belong. You’re that special to him!

It's not required, but one last time I invite you to close your eyes just for a moment so that you can visualize a scene. This one's in the future. You're on your deathbed, and you know it's almost time for this life to come to an end. And as you lay there, you think back on where you've been and what you've done. But mostly you think about where you're going. And a smile comes to your face because you know. There's no "I hope I was good enough," but only "I know that I will be with Jesus because he died for me and he chose me to be his forever."

Are we good enough to be chosen? No. But because of Jesus, who gives us his perfection, the result is yes. Let us therefore praise ***"the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"*** (v 3). Why? Because we belong . . . to him!

Amen