

“CHOSEN, HOLY, AND BELOVED”

Hosea 11:1-4; Colossians 3:12-17

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To be chosen... what a great feeling! Maybe you remember those days in childhood when the neighborhood kids gathered for a pick-up game of soccer, football, basketball or whatever. Maybe you were one of those standing there wanting above all else to not be chosen last. For me this worry arose in gym class where my friends were few and my abilities unknown. In school I was the socially awkward, gangly kid who frequently saw kids with less ability chosen before me. Even when the instructor had you line up and count off to determine teams, I noticed kids trying to get in the right order to be on the “right team.” I knew that to be chosen last was the same as not being chosen, the same as being excluded, not cool, not in.

I still remember tryouts for the freshman basketball team. I survived the first cut and the second cut. We were down to 16 players with only one more player to be cut. I was that player. In hindsight, I believe it was the best thing that could have happened to me, but that doesn't change how devastated I was at the time.

A few weeks later, playing on a team in a church league, I was able to let go of that, but only because I got more playing time there than I would have on the freshman team, and I was playing with others not quite so hung up on their status. I made friends. I was appreciated for my abilities. It was for me an experience of being chosen, of belonging.

The church has wrestled with its identity as the “chosen people of God.” It's an affirmation that roots us and grounds us in God's grace. But sometimes the church has forgotten that the affirmation is based in God's love and not our ability. It is a humble affirmation, not a statement of our superior value to God. Yet in our history, we have seen the church use it to condemn heretics, to denigrate other faiths, to exclude “sinners,” and to separate ourselves from the world of God's creation.

We weren't chosen for our sound theology, for belonging to the “right church,” for being “holy” (more about that in a minute), or for being above the evils of the world. We are chosen because God loves! We are chosen so that we might become something other than what we are. WE are chosen that we might clothe ourselves with compassion (an impossibility apart from the grace of God). We are chosen that we might learn to exercise kindness, humility, meekness and patience... that we might practice forgiveness and know the love that binds us together in harmony.

We are chosen because God loves! Does that make us special? Absolutely! Does it make us better than anyone else? Absolutely not! God's choosing is not exclusive. It's expansive. It doesn't set us apart from one another, but places us among each other. It does not applaud us for our wonderful abilities meritorious deeds, but invites us into a new relationship with God and the world. It provides the grace we need to become the people God intended.

We are holy despite all the evidence to the contrary. We are holy not because we have a degree in philosophy specializing in ethics. We are holy not because we have tried to live a good life. In the gospels Jesus railed against the Pharisees for their self-righteousness. While holding to the letter of the Sabbath, a lame man was not made to walk, a man born blind was not made to see. Many a good deed was not performed because of a rigid obedience to the Sabbath. Jesus healed the lame, gave sight to the blind, and in doing so violated the rule of the Sabbath. Jesus understood faith differently.

Holiness, for him was not about obeying the rules while others suffered. It was not about attaining some state of moral perfection. Faith could never be exercised in isolation. Faith was about connections and relationships, about mutual welfare, about health and wholeness and restoration.

We are not holy because we pray three hours a day, give alms to the poor, and meditate on scripture daily. These practices can guide us on the path of holiness... but they can also hinder us... hinder us when the practice becomes the substance of faith, when the personal righteousness closes our eyes to the neighbor in need.

We are holy as we “look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” We are holy as we see with the eyes of Jesus, as we embed ourselves in the community of faith. Holiness is not about achievement as much as it is about submission to the desires of God and the interests of others. Holiness comes in following Jesus and realizing that life is not about me. It is about “us.”

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved...” Beloved, this word stands at the center of who we are in Christ. At the baptism of Jesus, the voice speaks from the clouds, “This is my beloved...” This, too, is the central message of our baptism as well: we are loved by God... chosen, holy, and loved. We live out our faith under these three affirmations: God chooses us, directs us, and loves us.

In grief, we are loved by God. In sickness, we are loved by God. In perplexity and confusion, we are loved by God. In the midst of a world torn apart by hatred and distrust, we are loved by God. In the midst of violence, we are loved by God. We need the love of God when we face these challenges and many others.

But we are also loved by God in the celebrations of this past year. We know God’s love in worship through song, prayer, preaching, and sacrament. We know God’s love through gifted musicians and the joyful noise of the Lord that comes through those of us less gifted. We know the love of God in care extended to many in need. We know the love of God in mission undertaken, in service at Ministry with Community, in hosting the ISAAC Issues Convention, in honoring Donna Odom and her work with SHARE, and in the skillful hands of those knitting shawls to remind those who struggled this year of God’s love for them. We know the love of God in fellowship as we celebrated milestone birthdays and anniversaries. We know the love of God in staff devoted to the worship, music, care, and program of the church, as we gave thanks to Eileen for her years of service.

Beloved of God! That is what you are! Thanks be to God. Amen.