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“CHOSEN FOR FAITHFULNESS”

John 15:9-17

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Earlier in my ministry, I used to spend a week every summer working as a counselor or spiritual dean at church camp. In the Upper Peninsula where I was appointed following seminary, most pastors served at Camp Michigamme. Michigamme is the pride of the Marquette District because it is the only camp that is owned by a district in the state of Michigan.

Shortly after my arrival in that area, a colleague invited me to participate with him in a week called “Summer Games.” While I wasn’t necessarily a natural pick for a camp that sounds like it involves a lot of sporting activities, I was open to the challenge that it might present to me. It wasn’t long before I realized how great of an impact that week of camp had on the lives of many young people.

Each year as the week of Summer Games camp begins, shortly after the campers arrive, they are picked to be in “huddles,” which are like family units or diverse teams with two leaders that are between 16-20 years old. The process is called a “huddle draft.” That sounds like a sports camp, doesn’t it?

Perhaps already you are remembering those days in gym class when someone was the kid that was always picked last, right? When it came time to divide up into teams in gym class or out on the playground, the least athletic, the least popular, the smallest, the weakest, or the poorest dressed kid is chosen after everyone else has been picked. The last child standing is often assigned to be a part of a team that wished they could take a pass.

The first time I watched the huddle draft at Summer Games, I had visions of that last child being assigned. The campers were instructed to stand on a line and brought out by age groups. Then an adult leader would call out a huddle name and one of the huddle leaders would go in and snatch one of the kids off the line to be a part of their team, or huddle, for the week.

The most amazing thing happened as I watched the huddle draft that first summer at camp. As the huddle leaders went up to the line to pick out kids, the first kids they chose were often those who might be picked later or last at school. We started the draft with the youngest kids first. If you could only see the joy on their faces as they were chosen right away. The process went by so quickly that the kids who did eventually get picked last (the older and bigger, more competitive

youth) never had time to realize what was happening. The adult leaders who watched each year, however, were amazed by the choices of these young huddle leaders. Even more so, it was a tremendous blessing to see the excitement of children who finally felt chosen first. Some of the kids were surprised that they were picked early, but all of them were thrilled to receive the same embracing welcome to their huddles.

It feels good to be chosen rather than being the last one standing in line assigned to a team because they had no other choices left, doesn't it?

Today is Confirmation Sunday. At our 11:00 service, we will baptize three young people and confirm a total of 34 middle school students. Today, 34 young men and women will not only join our church, but will claim their baptismal vows for themselves. They'll own their faith journeys. Today, they are choosing to follow Jesus and reaffirm what others said for them years ago.

Yet, baptism and confirmation are not so much about what we do, but about what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. Even before we were aware of it, God placed a claim on our lives. In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells the disciples, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last..."¹

The disciples may have made a decision to follow Jesus, but Jesus first chose each of them and called out to them when they were not aware of what might be in store for them on the journey of discipleship. Our confirmands may be reaffirming the vows that parents took for them at baptism or affirming those vows for the first time today in their baptism, but long before this day, God (who knit them together in their mothers' wombs) had placed a claim on them. God has been calling to them and reaching out to them with love and grace well before they were aware of God or able to speak about God.

In a world that doesn't care if you're ever chosen, at the heart of the gospel is a God who loves us so much that, in Jesus Christ, God chooses you and me and everyone else across the face of the earth. We don't stand on the wall waiting to see if we'll be good enough to be picked up for the team. Rather, Jesus reminds us that God chooses us, even when we did not and do not choose God first.

Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit; fruit that will last." What fruit is Jesus talking about here? Perhaps we need to go back to the beginning of the lesson for the answer.

At the beginning of our lesson, Jesus says, "Abide in my love."² Eugene Peterson paraphrases this command in *The Message* where Jesus says, "Make yourselves at home in my love."³ Shortly after this, he reminds the disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

If 1 Corinthians 13 seems to sum up Paul's teaching on love, then this passage sends us to some of Jesus' core teaching on the subject. The lasting fruit that Jesus calls us to bear is the love that we have first experienced in him. When Jesus calls disciples to make ourselves at home in love,

we are invited to consider love to be the primary motivating factor in our lives. Love should encompass who we are and what we do. It should flow naturally from our lives.

In case you didn't know, last week was the spring rummage sale here at Birmingham First. Beginning on Sunday afternoon, the halls and rooms of this place were filled with plenty of treasures that others were giving away. It was hard to walk around the building and not notice the abundance which we all too often take for granted. My wife, Dawn, and I brought over a truckload and a half of donations. While we were celebrating that we've almost gained a room after bringing in several boxes of stuff that we didn't need anymore, we began to wonder if we needed any of it in the first place.

At the heart of this week, however, is a love that motivates us as a church to see lives transformed a treasures are turned into dollars for missions. Throughout the week, paid workers talk about how thankful they are to have the opportunity to earn some extra money when finances are tight at home. It seems that at every sale, I hear the story of a parent who is able to provide his or her children with clothing because of the bargain prices that we offer. Others tell stories of someone who is able to find great deals for Christmas or birthday gifts for their kids. Without our rummage sale, they wouldn't know what to do.

Local missions come in and fill up bags for people in other communities around us. At our fall and our spring sale, I've bumped into a United Methodist colleague as she was shopping to help out some of her congregants.

In addition to this, missions in our communities and around the world find their needs met by the gifts we are able to share with them. Friends, beloved ones, lay down their lives, giving up time and treasures, to share in this amazing outreach of love. Even during the sale, many develop deep friendships and relationships by the work that you do together.

Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends."⁴ The word for friends he uses here loses some meaning when it is translated from the Greek. In Greek, the word that Jesus uses has *philos*, one of two common words for "love," as its root. The essence of Jesus' statement is "I have called you 'those who are loved.'" The commands to "abide in my [Jesus'] love" and to "love one another" are grounded in the knowledge that the disciples themselves are also "beloved." Love flows out from those who are the beloved ones.

As I watched our young adult huddle leaders at Summer Games camp each year, I was always so impressed not only with how they wanted each child to experience God's great love in that huddle draft, but also with how they lived out their faith throughout the week. Out on the games field each day, they made sure that the child with lesser abilities had the first chance to bat or to get a ball. At the beach, young adults who had great swimming abilities agreed to be buddies with kids who couldn't go beyond the shallow waters because they did not pass the swim test. I even watched some of them teach kids how to swim and pass the test later in the week.

Their love for each child was a testimony of fruit that will last. It was no wonder we had a high rate of return campers at Summer Games camp each year. Perhaps at camp, if nowhere else, they experienced the lasting fruit of God's love lived out in the faithful community.

Perhaps, as a result of our ministry here at Birmingham First, if nowhere else, people throughout our world experience the lasting fruit of God's great love in Jesus Christ. Today, as we confirm 34 young people, we do so knowing that they go out as witnesses of the love that they have come to experience here in this place. They go out, realizing that God chooses them to bear fruit; fruit that will last...to be vessels of a lasting love that transforms the world.

Last night as they shared their creeds, many of them spoke of how they believe that God loves us "no matter what." They shared how Jesus came to show us how much God loves us all. They claimed a belief in a church that welcomes all and is a safe place for everyone. That's the fruit of your work, friends! As this confirmation class enters the world with a strong faith built on a love they learned from you, they bear with them a fruit that will last. Thanks be to God.

¹ John 15:16, NRSV.

² John 15:9, NRSV.

³ John 15:9, *The Message*

⁴ John 15:14-15, NRSV.