

Becoming the Beloved: Taken

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

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When I was in the 6th grade, I had just started wearing a lift on one of my shoes to help me walk better, because one of my legs was shorter than the other. That meant my shoes weren't as stylish as I would have liked in those brutal years of middle school. I also felt like these new shoes drew everyone's attention to my legs, one of which was significantly bowed and the other with a large scar from a recent surgery.

Needless to say, I was a nervous wreck at the middle school dance when someone introduced a new game called Cinderella's Slipper. Each of the girls was asked to take off one of her shoes and to put it in a bag. Each of the boys would pull a shoe from the bag, find the girl with the matching shoe, and ask her to dance. It sounds like a cute idea to get middle schoolers to dance, and it probably was, but given the uniqueness of my situation, I was terrified. I considered running to hide in the bathroom stall, but somehow I mustered up enough courage to take off my shoe and play the game.

I was anxiously pacing the room to see who my dance partner would be when I realized that the song had already started, and everyone else had already partnered up and begun dancing. It was then that I spotted my shoe, which had been thrown on the ground in the corner of the room. And all of the sudden, I was hit in the gut with the reality that I was not chosen. I will never forget that moment.

But I think we all carry stories like this with us – we never forget the pain of what it feels like not to be chosen. I asked people to share their stories about “not being chosen” on my Facebook page this week, and my inbox quickly became flooded with stories

One person wrote, I was playing outside with some friends one afternoon. We were riding our bikes back to our neighborhood when they started going faster ahead of me. I yelled for them to wait up, but they just pushed forward. I finally lost sight of them, but I saw them turn down the street where one of them lived and figured they went back to his house to play. So I went to his house, but when I got there, I didn't see any bikes out front. I knocked on the door but no one answered. I later found out that they were at his house the whole time, but hid their bikes in the back yard so I wouldn't see them and didn't answer the door when I knocked so that I would go away. I've never forgotten that.

Another wrote, one time in third grade, I hosted my first sleepover with a girl in my class who I considered one of my best friends. The following week, in class, that girl publicly humiliated me in class by sharing a secret I had confided in her that night as we had laid in my brother's Thomas the Tank Engine bed. I have the clearest, burning memory of my entire class laughing at me, while she stood towering on her chair, beaming at their response. I just wanted to

disappear. She moved on to the popular crowd the next week. I felt like I was just some plot of land for her to dig some dirt from.

Friends, we know the pain of not being chosen, don't we?

And it's interesting to me that almost all of the stories shared with me, including my own, were from childhood or middle school – yet we haven't forgotten them, have we? Not only that, but we have hung on to these stories, internalized them, digested them, accepted them, and come to believe them about ourselves for years now.

But the reality is that there are just as many, if not more, of these kinds of stories from adulthood, right? Perhaps it just feels too vulnerable for us to share these experiences.

Yet, many of us know the feeling of working so hard for the job we so desperately wanted, yet it went to the other candidate. Or we know what it feels like to put ourselves out there with someone new and to think we had a great time together, yet there was no second date. Or we look around and feel as if everyone else is partnered up in life, happily married, or even happily having their first baby - except us. Or we know how vulnerable it feels to muster up the courage to go out for the audition, yet we didn't make the choir or lead in the play, even though all of our friends got a part. Or despite trying as hard as we could to make the relationship work, the other person decided they didn't want to be with us anymore. Or the friend group we so desperately wanted to be in never invited us to join their inner-circles. People were polite and even friendly to us, even at church, but they never really welcomed us in.

At every age and stage of life, we know the pain of not being chosen. Which is why Jesus' words in John's gospel are so very significant: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

And it's significant that these words Jesus shares in John 15 actually come on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion. In just a few hours, Jesus knows that the disciples won't choose him. In just a few hours, he will know the pain of Judas betraying him. Jesus will know the pain of not being chosen when the crowd chooses to release Barabbas instead. Jesus will know the pain of Peter denying he ever knew him – three times. And Jesus will know what it feels like to go from being the chosen one on Palm Sunday when the crowds yell, "Hosanna!" to the one on Good Friday who cries out from the cross, "My God, my God...Why have you forsaken me?"

You see, Jesus knows the pain of not being chosen, doesn't he? Yet he still says, "You did not choose me, but I choose you." Friends – this is the good news of the gospel. God has already chosen us – long before we were ever even thinking about choosing God. Which is a good thing, because even when we do choose to follow Jesus, we, like the disciples, will still fail, time and time again.

In another story I heard this week, someone said this: "When I was maybe in 6th grade, one other girl, Lois, and I were always the last two picked for teams in games at school. Sometimes one of us, sometimes the other. And we kinda bonded over that. We became friends, I thought.

One time, Lois got chosen to be team captain – and I thought this was finally my chance to get chosen, except Lois didn't pick me, either. It must have stuck with me, because I still remember it, 50 years later.”

It's true that we know what it feels like not to be chosen. But I would also venture to guess that we know what it feels like to be Lois, too. Because when we can't accept our own belovedness, like we discussed last week, and when we fail to see how God has already chosen us, we will fail, over and over again, to choose other people – and to see the belovedness of God in other people, too.

You and I can spend our entire lifetimes trying to be chosen- in lots of different ways. But until we begin to realize our chosenness in God – until we realize the fullness and completeness that comes to us because the God of the universe has already chosen us - none of those other spaces will ever completely fill us, and we will always find ourselves wanting more. Needing more. Doing more. Trying to be more. And that kind of life – hustling for our chosen-ness but never “quite” reaching it - is death. It's not the life that Jesus offered to us when he said just a few chapters earlier this same gospel, “I have come so that you might have life – and have it abundantly.”

Friends, if you hear nothing else I say today, hear this: Even when the team doesn't choose us. When the job doesn't choose us. When the school doesn't choose us. When the church doesn't choose us. When our the popular people don't choose us. Even when the you fill in the blank doesn't choose us. Even in these moments, Jesus still says, “I choose you.”

You are chosen by God – each and every one of you, without exception. As Nouwen writes, “Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God's loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we are heard by our God how is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love. Our preciousness, uniqueness, and individuality are not given to us by those who meet us in clock-time – our brief chronological existence – but by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity.”

But as soon as we realize our chosen-ness, it's not so that we can stay stagnant or complacent, is it? After all, Jesus goes on to say this: “You did not choose me but I chose you” (and in the very next sentence) And I appointed you *to go* and *bear fruit*, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Jesus knew that we can't truly love one another if all we're doing is hustling and bustling for our own need to be loved and to be chosen. Otherwise it will always be about us and never about God.

Which is why John 15 tells us to remain connected to the Vine – to abide with God as God abides with us. Because as we abide with the God who calls us beloved, then we can't help but to share that Love with others.

The world is celebrating the life of Billy Graham this week – and Billy Graham is someone who embodied this love so well. In one anecdote I read about him this week, Pastor Les Hollon shared the following. "Billy Graham [once said], "When I get to Heaven, I hope God will say to me, 'Billy you done good. But I am just as thankful for that mountain preacher down the holler as I am of you.'" It is easy for us to imagine God now holding Billy in His arms, and whispering, "Well done!" Billy was an open vessel through whom God worked mightily, sharing the gospel to the largest audiences in world history.

[But, Pastor Les says,] a truly great person helps everyone else to know that they are equally important to God, with a remarkable life to live. Billy did that by always pointing to Christ. His mind and heart had been stretched the size of John 3:16. [And] he built big gathering places so everyone could know that they belonged."

In fact, "as early as 1953, Graham told a Chattanooga, Tennessee, crusade that he would not accept the usual practice of segregated seating and personally removed the ropes marking the [separate] section for people who were black."¹ Billy knew that God calls us to make the table longer and the tent wider so that everyone can know that they belong.

And I think Billy understood that our calling in this arena is so much greater as the Church, because the stakes are so much higher. When people don't feel chosen by a fraternity or sorority, it hurts. When people don't feel chosen for a job or a team or a play, it can be deeply disappointing. But in a community like ours, where we look one another in the eyes and say, "We pledge ourselves to be the family of God for you in this place" – if someone don't feel like they belong here or in another faith community – it's devastating. It's one of the top reasons people say that they've been hurt by the Church, and often times, they leave and never muster up enough courage to "put themselves out there" again and go back.

It's one of the main reasons we've been trying a new model of small groups at Calvary. Because the old model of long-term groups left some people feeling chosen and others not. Yet in our new groups, we have spaces to welcome everyone, even if it has meant multiplying groups and adding additional meeting spaces. And obviously this is something people in our community are hungry for – we have 10 different groups meeting this spring with over 100 different people involved. And I think what we saw last fall and what we will continue to see is new life springing forth from these new relationships that will keep growing long after groups stop meeting. But it all starts with creating spaces and opening homes where everyone knows they are chosen. It's why we take every child or youth to camp – and go out of our way to raise money for scholarships for these experiences – and it's why you give so generously toward these efforts - because we want each child and youth to know that they are God's chosen. It's why we all sit

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/22/us/billy-graham-mlk-civil-rights/index.html>

within the congregation in worship and no one sits on the stage – because none of us is more important than the other; we are all God’s chosen. And it’s why we don’t have auditions to sing in the choir and all are welcome to join us each week – because all of us are God’s chosen.

But there’s always room for us to grow here, too, and that’s one of the things I would love for us to talk about in our small groups this week. How can we as Calvary continue to extend the love of Christ to all in our midst, in our neighborhood, and in our world? Living together out of our chosenness, how can we reveal to others that they are loved and chosen by God, too?

There’s actually a happier ending to the story I shared at the beginning about my middle school dance. Just as I was turning to go to the bathroom to try to hide in a bathroom stall for a few moments, one of my favorite teachers, Mr. Hancock, walked up to me. He could tell I was crying; I was so embarrassed. And then I looked down and realized that he was holding my shoe. And in that moment, he asked me to dance.

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do or how to respond. But even amidst my pain and disappointment, in that moment I also experienced the joy of what it feels like to be chosen – chosen by someone I admired and respected far more than the middle school boys in my class. And in that moment, I danced.

You see, I believe that ultimately, our chosenness is what invites us to do beautiful things in Kingdom of God. It’s what compels us to reach out to those who don’t feel chosen to remind them that they, too, are beloved by God. Remembering our chosenness helps to dry our tears, comforts us in our pain, and tells us that we don’t have to live in shame any more. Because life with God offers another way – a better way – a fuller way to live. And ultimately, our chosenness is what gives us the courage to get up and dance.