

Building Community: Chosen For Family

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Ephesians 1:3-14

Children's Time

I have a tool box full of tools here. Maybe there is a toolbox like this in your house too. Why do you think I need so many tools? Because each of these tools does something different and when I need to get a job done I need a certain kind of tool.

Phyllis, Qwynn, and I just moved into a new house and we have been doing all kinds of work around the house. I have needed to use a bunch of different kinds of tools for different jobs.

There were times that I needed to nail boards together. Which tool do you think I used? Right, a hammer!

There were times when I needed to measure a piece of wood or drywall. What did I use? Yup, a tape measure!

There was a time when I needed to scrape a wall to get off old caulk.

What do you think I used? Yup, this scraper.

There is not one tool that can do everything.

The congregation of people here is like God's tool box. Everybody is a bit different and has different skills, different personalities, different talents, and everybody looks a bit different don't they?

We are like God's tools! Everyone belongs in the toolbox and has a different job. Some have musical talent, like Jack over there at the organ. Wave to Jack. Some people help to read scripture and lead worship like Marilyn. Wave to Marilyn. Some people have the talent of teaching like Phyllis. Wave to Phyllis. Not one person does everything.

It doesn't matter what your talent is and it doesn't matter if you are big or small, there is a place for you in God's family, in this community.

Look around you. See the people in this sanctuary? They are like God's tools. Each one has a job to help grow God's Church.

Lord, we thank you that you have given each of us special abilities to do things in your Church. Amen.

Sermon

During the next few weeks we'll be looking at Ephesians in a series on building community. In the spirit of Paul, the Apostle I say ...

“To the saints who are in Birmingham and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What does being chosen mean to you?

Being chosen means:

- Having value
- Being included
- Being part of the inner circle
- Being on the inner crowd.
- If I am chosen it means that I am not alone — there are others who are with me, part of me, and I part of them. Together we will win and lose, struggle and succeed.

I imagine many of you have had the experience of being chosen onto teams on the playground, or with a group of friends who wanted to play some kind of game.

I remember lining up with a bunch of other kids on the elementary school playground when I was in third grade. I was new to the

school and one of the younger kids. Two kids who were designated leaders stood facing us to choose their teams. They each took turns picking from the line up in which I stood. I watched as the two teams each got bigger and the group I was standing with got smaller. I wanted to be chosen, but those two leaders didn't know me very well and I was smaller and younger than the others.

As that selection process carried on, I felt my self esteem dropping because I was wasn't chosen. I felt like the team captains didn't consider me as a good player like the other kids. I wasn't as valuable.

I wondered, were they right? Am I not as good as the others? Would I not be as much help to win the game as some other, bigger kids?

It doesn't feel good not to be chosen.

But it does feels good to be chosen — to be part of something bigger than yourself, to belong!

READ Ephesians 1:3-14

It says here that God chose us to be blameless in love as part of God's family.

From the time of Abraham, the Hebrews had been told that they were special as God's chosen people. That settled into their minds and hearts in a particular way over time.

One of the pitfalls was that they developed a nation-centric, elitist mindset — that they were God's chosen people and everyone else was not. This led to arrogance, considering themselves superior to others who were less.

One way to think about this is that they had an "US-THEM" mentality. We are up on the mountain with God while everyone else is down in the valley apart from God.

This is an easy trap for us as well. After all, we gain a sense of pride when we are on a great team, or even associated with a great team, like the University of Michigan football team, who is now 3-0, undefeated, and ranked in the top ten in the nation.

When we identify with a great team we celebrate their victories and dominance. We think that we have arrived and can get puffed up and arrogant about our superiority.

By the way, identifying with the Detroit Tigers this year would not give you that feeling.

The only thing is that God never desired for the "chosen people" to have an "US-THEM" mentality. God was never into nation-building, and superiority thinking like this. God's community was never intended to be an exclusive members-only club, insulated from, and set to the exclusion of others.

There is a little word in this passage that is crucial to our understanding of God's community: grace.

Paul wrote that we are chosen by grace to be included in God's community. This makes all the difference.

Grace was extended to us for what God wants to do through us, not to work out our own selfish purposes.

This leaves no room to be arrogant and centered on ourselves and our superiority. Being chosen aka us to be humble and center ourselves around God's purposes.

Paul develops the idea of God's purposes through this letter. It is about working in step with God

whose out-stretched arms are creating an inclusive love-centered family community of all things on earth and in heaven.

In this way, God is growing a cosmic community where all things are being gathered together in God.

God's community is where all things are being re-aligned with their original purpose, brought into the realm of our creator God and under the Lordship of Jesus.

This is a picture of the currently developing and yet to be fully established realm of God.

Paul is giving us the big picture of God's ultimate plan for the redemption and salvation of all the world.

It is inside this big picture plan that everything else in the letter will make sense. So, at the beginning of the letter we get a bird's eye view first, before zooming in on the specifics.

Paul described how this plan was also part of the ancient plan from back in Genesis 18 when Abraham was chosen to be a blessing, and to pass on that blessing not only to a small group of Hebrew people, but to Gentiles as well, to all the

nations of the earth, and to and for all future generations.

All are part of God's plan.

The other ancient story that was recalled here by Paul is the Passover, when the Hebrews were rescued by God, saved from slavery in Egypt. Remember how people put the blood of the lamb over their door frames and that protected them?

Paul was saying that Jesus' blood now saves, like the lamb's blood did for the Hebrews. Here is a picture of God doing the same thing as in the ancient past — God was saving the people, but this time the act of grace is expanded in a new way for all people.

Jesus redeemed them, forgave them, made them — and makes us to be one family, one community under Christ.

So, Christ is the fulfillment of this pivotal Jewish story of the exodus. It exhibits the salvation brought by our God in a deeper, expanded, more complete way than the Jewish people had been able to see.

This ancient story is now our story too. We can celebrate the grace of

God that is being lavished all over us, saving us, protecting us, forgiving us, freeing us from all that has kept us apart — that we might live fully as the community of God, building the realm of God in this world.

As part of that community, this passage also reminds us that we have an inheritance through Christ, like a blood relative would. This puts us in the inner circle, binds us together with others in this family with all the rights and privileges given us by God as our parent.

The benefits of inheritance for the Hebrews was land. They had been a displaced people in Egypt without a place they could call their own. They longed for an inheritance of land — a promised land, a home.

Paul reimagines this idea of an inheritance for the Church in a new age. The inheritance he imagines is complex. It includes forgiveness and redemption, but the equivalent of land is a place in the family of God, a place in the community where we belong and can thrive as human beings.

When we join this community we become aligned with God such that what happens to God happens to us and what happens to us

happens to God. This is in part what it means to be part of God's family.

It also means that since we are chosen by God as the Church, we are the sign of God's realm to the world. The Church is God personified in the world. We represent God to the world.

Part of our role as God's community is to live in such a way that the rest of the world might see in us who God is. That they might see in us what the fulfillment of God's grace and love really look like.

You might hear that and think, "Holy cow, we have a long way to go!"

That was Paul's point. This realm of God fully present in this world is promised and yet not fully realized. We have a long way to go, and yet this is our work — it is God's work in us.

We do this work building God's community with expectant hope that God will bring this work to completion through the Holy Spirit.

With that hope we can even now rejoice!