

May 6, 2018 – The Sixth Sunday of Easter. Farewell & Godspeed to Ole & Anna
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 15:9-17

Picked

I'm beginning today's sermon with a bad joke, a dad joke, dad jokes being what you call the most excruciating of bad jokes. As it happens, this joke actually comes from my dad. It goes like this: You can pick your friends. You can pick your nose. But you can't pick your friend's nose. (I told you it was bad.) You can pick your friends, people you will hang out with, play with. You can pick people to be on your team. Recently in the news there were stories about the NFL draft, the top picks. Earlier this year the NBA did something different for the All Star game: to make the teams they had two top players act as captains and then made their picks.

That about exhausts my knowledge of the NFL and NBA. I mention those bits because of this theme of picking, because those illustrations play out on a professional level that most excruciating of school yard experiences: picking for teams. Do you remember that? The school yard pick? Just saying the phrase sends me back to Gym class, to a co-ed assortment of awkward adolescents made to face off in opposition. But first the waiting, the wondering if your name will be called, the heightened tension, the hoping that you'll be chosen, the loneliness that lingers around the one who is last.

It's a lousy feeling, not being picked. Not making the team, or being the last one on it and not getting to play. Not getting invited. Not getting elected. It's a lousy feeling, not being chosen, and not being in any position to do anything about it.

"You weren't in a position to choose," Jesus says in today's gospel, "You did not choose." Jesus says this in the context of a long speech in the gospel of John, a last long speech, what's known as the Farewell Discourse. That's what we heard from just, now, but it's first audience is the disciples, who have gathered with Jesus for a meal. They don't realize the significance of this meal. They don't know what he knows, what we know, that this is the last meal, the last supper, that they will share with him this side of the grave. They don't know what we know, that these are Christ's final instructions for his followers before he heads for the cross. Before he goes there, Jesus chooses to say this: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

In saying it, Jesus pretty much summarizes all the disciples' call stories into a single sentence—while also reminding them, reminding us, that things are different when you hang around him. Think about the disciples and how they came by that title. Being with Jesus was not something they earned, or achieved, it was not something they tried out for—discipleship being different from competitive sports. No, he went out and found them, called them, chose them—and they were not top round draft picks. They were in pretty rough shape, the ones Jesus chose to be around. Most of them were injured in some way or another. And he picked them, these people who were not in a select position, who were used to being last. Jesus picked them, as God has a habit of doing, you see it all throughout the scriptures, how God is intent on adding to his team the last, and the lost, and the least. God is always looking for people on the margins. Even more than that, God is always looking for people outside of the margins. God is always asking, and so asking us: "Who have we missed? Where are the ones who have not been picked?"

As Jesus looked at the disciples that night, he must have seen on their faces that they themselves were still feeling a little lost, the anxiety and fear, still lingering on them. It was a night of heightened emotion, nervous expectation. They didn't know all that would happen, but they must have been feeling beleaguered, he had told them he was going away. Jesus sees this, and knows they need a reminder: that's how they were when he found them, and chose them. As

then, so also now, he sees them, and loves them. This, too, being something God does throughout the scriptures, sees the lost and loves them. Jesus reminds the disciples, “I picked you,” and he also says this, “You are my friends.”

Not only have they been chosen, they’ve been given a changed relationship. Being with Jesus, being on his team, requires change. That, too, was apparent from the beginning of their call. The fishermen had to leave their nets. It could no longer be business as usual. Jesus is looking for more from them, asking more of them. Things are different when you hang around him. Jesus says, “I do not call you servants any longer, I call you friends,” and explains what that means, being his friend: Unlike a servant, who doesn’t know what the master is doing, a friend knows what’s going on, how one thinks and feels and is a part of one’s life in good times and bad. A friend is there when times are tough, is willing to put themselves in the place of pain, help out, even at personal cost.

This is what it is to be a friend, Jesus says, summarizing it in a single sentence, “Love one another as I have loved you.” To be a friend, do what he’s been doing. Think of all the ways Jesus embodied friendship, all described for us, before this, in this gospel: There were the deep conversations he had with people: Nicodemus at night, the Samaritan woman at the well. There were the celebrations, the good times shared, the wedding at Cana, the banquet to which 5,000 people came. What great parties those were! So many people, so many who had never been picked before, invited into abundance! There were also times of sorrow, of weeping; Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. There were the acts of service and care, as when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. That happened just moments before this speech. The Farewell Discourse follows this most intimate and humble sign, footwashing. That act was fresh in the disciples’ minds when Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

In these and so many other ways, Jesus shows what it is to be a friend. In many ways it is the very point of Jesus’ life, of incarnation, why God chose to become human: to make friends. Was God lonely? I don’t think so, the Holy Trinity is sufficient unto itself. Rather, God became human to make us friends, to make friends something we could be, to show us, tell us, you do this, now, do it like this. Jesus’ pronouncement takes the call of discipleship to a whole new level: “I picked you,” Jesus says, “and now I call you friends.”

Jesus said this some two thousand years ago, but it strikes me as so very pertinent just right now. Perhaps more than anything else, our world needs friends, the kind of friends that Jesus makes. You, too, have probably heard stories of isolation, of reports that it is on the rise. You too may have seen studies on loneliness; some are calling it an epidemic. Even as technology makes us more connected, feelings of disconnection are flourishing, bearing their terrible fruit: alienation, opioid and other addictions, excruciating violence.

Our world needs more than affinity groups to overcome this—affinity groups often only exacerbate the disconnection, devolving as they do into tribalism, factions. We who would call ourselves Christians are called to something more. It is why we are here, it is what this community can be: something different, a place where people gather beyond mere commonalities, a place where we gather for deeper conversation, a place where people work through tough times, a place where people weep together, and rejoice together.

Even on that emotional night so long ago, with all that was to come, Jesus speaks of joy, says, “Be a friend, that your joy may be full. The disciples then may have not yet understood why, how he could possibly say this, but we should. We can take Jesus at his word, we can respond to his call to leave what we know and follow him. Being a friend is always something we can choose to do, for Christ has won the victory. Christ has already won. And now he’s saying to us, “I’m picking you to be on the winning team.”