

*Saturday, summers, when I was a kid
we'd run to the school yard, and here's what we did:
Pick out the captains and choose up the teams; I was a measure of my self-esteem
'cause the strongest and fastest played short stop and first;
the last ones they picked were the worst;
I never needed to ask, it was sealed – and I'd take my place in right field.*

That's the first verse of a charming, poignant song about not feeling good enough,
written by my friend Willy Welch,
who has gone through life not feeling good enough.

One of the ministers at our church in New York knew Noel Paul Stookey,
and taught him the song on a porch at Martha's Vineyard one summer.
Noel Paul Stookey was part of the group Peter, Paul and Mary,
who started doing it in concert. It's in that concert that recurs on PBS.
And every time that concert was run, Willy got some royalty money,
and the song got out there. Then Pizza Hut based a commercial on it,
which ran in the World Series – that bought Willy and his family a house.
Then Scholastic Books decided to publish it as a children's book with beautiful
Illustrations – that got them a mini-van.

This song about not being good enough to be picked ended up making
Willy's career as a singer-songwriter – because its message of succeeding
despite not being chosen resonated with so many people.

Who of us can't relate to that feeling of being the last one picked for a team?

The one not asked to dance, the one never picked for the best job?

Well, Jesus has some big news for us this morning: I choose YOU!

"You did not choose me – I chose you, from before time began,

to be my sister, my brother, central to my mission to love this world.

I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. "

That message didn't end in that upper room on the night before Jesus died.

It carried over to all those who came after those disciples turned apostles.

It comes down to us – we stand in that apostolic succession, all the way to us.

What's the difference between a disciple and an apostle?

A disciple is one who follows the discipline of a master, learning their way
of thinking and doing. We are called to be disciples learning from Jesus.

Apostle means “person sent.”

It was the word given those who knew Jesus in his earthly life,
and witnessed his resurrection life – encountered him after he was risen.

Where a disciple learns from a master,
an apostle helps spread that teaching to others.

We are called to be both, my friends. And all the talk of discipleship
in the church can obscure the importance of apostleship.

That night, Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he loved them –
So he reinforced their belovedness.

He told them they had been chosen by him –
not only to be loved, also to bear fruit, fruit that would endure.

He sent them with a purpose – that night they became apostles.

And a few weeks later, just before he ascended into heaven,
he commissioned them even more specifically: “You are my witnesses.
Go testify – in your own town, in your region, to the ends of the earth.”

What is the fruit Jesus wants us to bear? What does that fruit look like?

It takes many forms, but it begins with extending what we’ve just received:
Being chosen. Being loved.

In those first months and years after Jesus ascended and then the Spirit
descended at Pentecost, those first apostles had to figure out the fruit.
They were part of the Chosen People, the Jews, and they thought Jesus’ message
was for those Chosen. But the Spirit is always bigger than we think – and
Peter got an invitation to speak about Jesus at the home of a Roman centurion.
Normally, a good Jew would not go into the home of a Gentile, an un-chosen,
but the Spirit had given Peter a vision that taught him
not to draw the lines so close. So he went, and as he is talking about Jesus,
the Spirit comes in power upon those Gentiles gathered there.

They manifest the same gifts as the Apostles did at Pentecost!

Peter and his companions are shocked – These people aren’t even baptized!

But they say, “Hey, if God chose to send his Spirit upon them, guess God is bigger
than our rules and assumptions. Why not let them be baptized.”

And the Church grew.

We are still in a world full of people who feel unchosen,
who don’t think anyone would choose them.

How do gangs and white supremacy groups and right-wing militias gain members? They tell disaffected young men, mostly men, that they are chosen.

They are worthy. There is such a hunger for that message it's fueling hate!

Friends, that message is meant to fuel love! It's our message.

We invite people to part of this enterprise of love and chosenness.

And the only way we can make that love known is if we believe it for ourselves.

We have to let Jesus love us.

Only when we truly know how much we are loved by God, with all our shadow sides, are we able to offer unconditional love to other people.

We invite people to be part of something that is supposed to be marked by joy – that's the third thing Jesus told his followers that night.

"I want my joy in you, and your joy to be complete." Not partial, complete!

I am becoming more and more aware of how much stress and overwork can get in the way of being loving and joyful.

Stress and overwork are too often a part of our lives as churchgoers.

Yesterday, at our Spa for the Spirit, I sensed Jesus say to me,

"I want you to dance more." Which was code for, "I want more joy for you."

As I thought, "Where would I dance?" the idea came to me of outdoor dances at church this summer, maybe on Thursday nights. What says joy more than dancing!

I believe what Jesus wanted for the Church.

I believe it is the mystical Body of Christ, his hands and feet and voice and conscience given for the life of this world. I believe there is still power in this ancient idea, this sacred community across time and space.

I believe this is the way God has chosen to make his love abundantly real to the world, the vessel through which God's transforming love can work the most powerfully. And the only message the world will truly understand is love.

Friends. Jesus said we are no longer servants, but friends,

chosen in love, appointed to bear fruit, enduring, life-changing fruit.

So let that Holy Spirit come upon us as it did on those people at Cornelius' house.

Let's let that Spirit in, so that we are bursting with love and joy,

Bursting to bear ripe, beautiful, abundant fruit in Jesus' name!

Amen.

John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“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. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. 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.”