

*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; always 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 often felt not good enough. He used to sing it at gatherings of our church in New York. One of the ministers at that church 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, and they started doing the song in concert. It's in a 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 the song, 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 into wholeness. 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.

I tell the story about Willy's song both because its theme of chosenness – and for the way people started to share it because its story resonated with them. And then they shared it, and they shared it, and it spread around the world.

That's the way the Gospel has always spread – person to person, story to story.

That night, Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he loved them –

He reinforced their belovedness. He told them he had chosen them – not only to be loved, also to bear fruit, fruit that would endure.

He sent them with a purpose; that night they went from being disciples to apostles.

And a few weeks later, just before he ascended into heaven, which we celebrate

Thursday 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.”

In those first months and years after Jesus went up and then the Spirit came down, those first apostles had to figure out just how far Jesus meant them to witness.

They were part of the Chosen People, the Jews, and they thought Jesus' message was for those Chosen. But the Spirit is always up to something bigger than we think. Peter got invited 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 goes, 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 Jewish! They're not 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.

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. We live in a world full of people who feel unchosen, who don't think anyone would choose them, who are un-choosing each other.

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!

That message is meant to fuel love! It's our message.

We invite people to be part of this party of love and chosenness.

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!

What Jesus wanted for the Church then, he wants for the Church now:

That we know ourselves to be chosen, loved, fruitful and joyful.

There is still power in this ancient idea, this sacred community across time and space.

This church, with all its flaws, 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. The only message people all understand is love.

We bring the love – love of God, love of self, love of our neighbors;

And the gifts and resources God has given us; and the Spirit shows up.

Today after church we are invited to gather to talk about adding a dimension to our Plentiful Pantry ministry: a monthly "Shopping Sunday."

Right now people can come every Friday to receive pre-packed bags of food.

They are packed with love and care – but they may or may not have what people want to eat. And the system was designed during the pandemic to have the least amount of personal contact. It's hard to show our love.

On Shopping Sundays we would invite people to come at 12:30 – or even to church at 11 – and go through the Pantry themselves, picking out what they want.

While they waited their turn, there would be lunch and children's activities in the Parish Hall, and we – a whole lot of us – would be there to talk and engage, let them know how beloved and chosen they are, find out what besides food they need, and find out what gifts they have to share.

I think we'll have some anointed appointments, some amazing connections.

We can build relationships that God can use to bring about even more fruit.

Nobody expected the Spirit to show up in Cornelius' house...but there she was.

We can be sure the Spirit will show up in unexpected ways as we plan this and as we offer it.

We will share this love and our stories, person to person, and it will spread.

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.”

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.