

It's been great to see the kids in our Summer Flames Club out having fun on the school playground over the last few weeks. Otherwise, outside of a few neighborhood children here and there, that playground would be pretty empty this time of year. But, by September the playground will be teeming with even more boys and girls, climbing, running, sliding, playing games as a new school year begins. Often times when I see **and hear** the children out on the playground I think back to the days when **I** was in elementary school.

I'd like you to go back with me, if you will, to **your** days on the school playground. You're there, with the other kids, just playing around, when someone suggests a game of kickball. Quickly, the two biggest, most athletic boys proclaim themselves captains, and they begin to choose one-by-one who will be on their team.

The fastest runners and hardest kickers are chosen quickly. Then the captains begin the painful process of trying to sort through the leftovers. No one wants that one boy that misses every other ball that comes his way. Or that one girl who doesn't run very fast. Or the scrawny kid because he's half the size of the others. And so, they aren't even chosen. They're left out.

Whether it's kickball or getting a part in the school play or being selected for a promotion at work, each of us wants to be chosen. Picked for the team. In this world, being chosen says something about who we are. It gives us a sense of identity. Of belonging. Yes, in many ways, being chosen means you're special.

I. But . . . if we're left out, it implies that, for some reason, we don't quite measure up, that we aren't good enough. In our society, where a person's value is based on worldly standards, it's easy to feel as if you don't belong. If you don't wear the right clothes, drive the right car, or aren't beautiful or smart, then in many ways you don't measure up. You aren't good enough. And therefore, you don't belong.

And if we apply that same system of determining value and worth to the Church, we quickly see that when it comes to spiritual things, we really don't belong here, either- none of us. We say in our Creed that we believe in one Holy Christian Church, the communion of **saints**. But then we look at our lives and see that "saint" isn't the first word that comes to mind in describing ourselves. Each of us has plenty of moments we can recall when we've failed to live as God created us to live. We look at His Word, His Law, and we can easily see how often we've broken His commandments. We may have a particular sin—or even many sins—we're so ashamed of that we've never admitted them to anyone. I've got those kinds of sins. And I think you do too. And our sins, like flaws in

our personality or defects in our bodies, show us that we don't even belong in the Church. That we aren't "good enough" to be in God's presence, let alone be chosen by Him.

II. But then we read the words of St. Paul in our text this morning from Ephesians. I'd like to highlight portions of the first paragraph and have you focus on who, exactly, is the subject in these verses. Pick out who's doing the action in each sentence, and I'll try to help:

He has "blessed us" (v 3), He "chose us" (v 4), He "predestined us" (v 5), (again) He has "blessed us" (v 6), He "lavished upon us" (v 8), and He "set forth" (v 9). Notice that in each of these verses, it is **God** who is doing the action. **He** is doing the choosing. **He** is deciding who belongs to Him. And on what basis is He doing the choosing? It isn't based on our actions or on how well we meet His expectations, because all of us sin and fall short of His glory. Instead, God chooses us, Paul says, *to be* "holy and blameless" in His sight (v 4). "In love," v 5, "he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons *through Jesus Christ.*" "In *him* we have redemption through *his* blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (v 7).

Why are we chosen? God chooses us for one reason and one reason only. It definitely isn't anything about me or what I have done that led Him to choose me. Instead, He chose me—as He chooses each of us—based **not** on **our** merits, but on the merits of Christ, which are freely given to us. Freely credited to us. By faith, we are made His.

In Jesus—through our faith in His life, His death, and His resurrection—God loves us and chooses us. And for that very reason, we **belong**. He's the captain, and He has made us a part of His team, part of His family. And if you look in the Bible, you'll see story after story where God chooses someone to be His, not because they are so worthy, but simply because He loves them.

Look at David, a small shepherd boy, who later in life would have a man killed in order to steal that man's wife. Still, God chooses him as king, and as forerunner to Christ. Or look at Paul himself. Persecutor of the early believers, hands covered with the blood of the first Christians. Still, God chooses him to be an apostle to the world. Did God choose these men because they were so good? No, He chose them because He loved them and wanted them to be His.

And in the Gospels, we see the twelve disciples. Not exactly pillars of society, these men. Still, Jesus sends them out into the world armed only with His authority. And as the disciples go out, they do great things. Not because they are great people, but because they belong to Him. As Luke records the time Jesus sent His disciples out to heal in His name, he tells us that when the

disciples returned they were really excited about all the things they had done: demons were cast out, the sick were healed. But Jesus tells them that they shouldn't be so excited about the great things that they could do. They should rejoice instead that their names are written in the book of life. Rejoice, He says, because you belong.

III. It's not required, but I invite you to close your eyes just for a moment so that you can visualize a scene from the past. The distant past. A time, in fact, before time even was. In the vast emptiness before creation, God alone existed. And before he ever said, "Let there be light," He chose you. Paul says, "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (vv 4-5). Before you were—before *anything* was—God chose you. That makes you special—special to Him. He wrote your name in the book of life, because He wants you to be with Him forever. What a source of joy! What a source of comfort! To know that we are His, both now and forever, solely because of our faith in Jesus. You're that special to Him!

Some of you may have noticed that at certain times in the worship service—during the Invocation, the Creed, or while receiving Communion—I and other worshipers follow the ancient custom of making the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross is a reminder of our Baptism. That's because as one remembers his or her Baptism, they are reminded that they've been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and therefore they belong to God.

**Next time/ Today**, as you come to the Lord's Supper, I want you to notice that each of the Communion wafers is marked as well. Marked with the sign of the cross. Take a moment to notice it. To consider that mark. Let it remind you that through the sacrifice of Jesus, you also are marked and you also belong. You're that special to Him!

This also is not required, but one last time I invite you to close your eyes just for a moment so that you can visualize a scene. This one's in the future. You're on your deathbed, and you know it's almost time for this life to come to an end. And as you lay there, you think back on where you've been and what you've done. But mostly you think about where you're going. And a smile comes to your face because you **know**. There's no "I hope I was good enough," but only "I **know** that I will be with Jesus because He died for me and **He chose me** to be His forever."

Are we good enough to be chosen? No. But because of Jesus, who gives us His perfection, the result is yes. Let us therefore praise "the God and Father of

our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (v 3). Why? Because we belong . . . to Him! Amen.