

Grow wide: Our welcome to all

Lessons: Romans 1:16-17; 3:22-24; 8:1-2

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%201:16-17;%203:22-24;%208:1-2>

Do you remember choosing teams in school? It didn't matter whether you were choosing teams for an informal game of Red Rover or for the most important math competition in the fifth grade in your small town ever. Remember how it went? Two captains would emerge. Sometimes the teachers would select them, sometimes the captains would appoint themselves, but two people took charge. How many of you were one of those kids who were captains? Yeah, me neither. Never a captain. If you weren't a captain, then you prayed you would be one of the Kids Who Get Picked.

If you're one of that cluster of kids then the whole time — which seems endless — you're hoping to be a Kid Who Gets Picked. It doesn't matter whether you're any good at whatever the competition is, you have no control over whether you're a Kid Who Gets Picked. The waiting was the worst. Maybe you read a book while they did the picking, hoping to look nonchalant, like you didn't care whether you got picked. But everyone cares, and no one wants to be the kid who is left off the team. No one wants to be left out.

If you do remember that aspect of school, you might also remember that if you were not a Kid Who Gets Picked very often, you begin to "know" that you're not going to get picked. Deep down, a voice begins to tell you that you're never going to be picked. Ever. Deep down, you begin to feel as though you're not wanted.

There is nothing quite like feeling as though you're not wanted.

In my freshman year at college I was part of a largish social circle that consisted mostly of the women at my end of the dorm hallway. We did a lot of chatting and hanging out together, ate together in the dining hall, and so forth, usually in small groups. I remember this one time when one of the women told me offhandedly that a bunch were going to the mountains that day. It wasn't a mean comment, like "we're going and you're not ha ha ha" or anything like that. It was offhand: she was telling me something that she was doing that day. But hearing it, I felt unwanted.

She didn't ask me to come, she didn't invite me, so I felt unwanted. It wasn't too much later that I realized that we had all been such casual and easy friends that she assumed that if I wanted to go I would simply say I was coming, or ask to come along. But in that moment, I was standing in that cluster, waiting to be a Kid Who Gets Picked. And deep down, the voice told me that I wasn't wanted.

We've all been through this, haven't we? Feeling as though we are not wanted? Or being afraid we might not be?

Some of us compensate for that fear of not being wanted by making sure we're indispensable. We create the games of Red Rover. We start the math competitions, or bring the food. We coach the teams. Or we become the referees, the peacemakers, the ones who know the rules better than anyone. A whole lot of us learn the rules of getting along, of popularity and success, and we follow the rules to the letter. That's the way we fit in: by being needed, or by living beyond reproach. How many of us find that little niche, that corner to fit into, and learn the rules really well so we never have to deal with feeling like we're not wanted?

There is nothing quite like feeling as though you're not wanted.

And there is nothing like knowing you are. There is nothing like knowing you are wanted. If you're standing around in a cluster or burying your nose in a book just waiting to not be picked ... again ... there's nothing like hearing someone call your name. The captain calls your name and it sets you free. It's like the weight of the waiting lifts off your shoulder. Doesn't matter how you do. Knowing you're wanted is enough.

There is nothing like knowing you are wanted. There is nothing like knowing you were chosen. There's nothing like knowing you were picked for the team, or asked to come along. When you're asked to come along, not because of what you can bring with you, but just for yourself, it's the best feeling in the world, because someone said, "you".

When God came to us as Jesus, it was God's way of saying, "You. I pick You."

God looked around, and saw all the people who didn't know how much God loved them. God saw all the people who didn't know they were wanted. God saw all the people who never got picked, or who got picked for all the wrong reasons. So God came to us as Jesus to open wide the invitation. So Jesus said, "You. I pick You."

God also saw all the people who knew all the rules and how to behave and knew how to fit in. They were the Pharisees and the rich then, but we know them now as the really socially acceptable people. They knew where to go and what to do, but their hearts were broken and their souls empty. God saw them and knew that they were shackled, knew that they were tied up in bondage, that they were enslaved by their fitting-in-ness. God knew that the ones who fit it by following the rules and making the games work and planning the events often didn't know the freedom that comes from knowing you're wanted and loved just for you.

There's freedom in knowing you're wanted and loved. So Jesus said, "You. I pick You."

When Jesus walked along the waterfront and pointed to the poor fishermen, he said, "You. I pick You."

And when he had a meal in the homes of the despised ones, the ones who never got picked or were picked for all the wrong reasons, he said, "You. I pick You."

And when walked along healing the untouchables, touching them, and when he spoke with women who were to be seen and not heard, and when he taught the illiterate, he was saying "I pick You."

And when Jesus sat with the disciples and shared a meal with them, and gave them bread and wine and said this is my body and my blood that I am freely giving to you, remember me and remember the One who sent me loves you, he was saying, "I pick You."

And when Jesus was hanging on the cross, it was God saying to each one of us: "I pick You. And You. And You. And You, and You, and You. And even you. Even you. All of you. There is not one of you who cannot be on my team. You want to be on? Then I pick you."

If you know your Bible at all, you know that Jesus seemed to prefer the poor, the broken, the outcasts, the ones in need of healing, the kids who were never picked. I think it's because if you're poor or broken or outcast or in need of healing, you really need to know you're wanted and loved.

And there's nothing like knowing you're wanted and loved to set you free.

One of the things that always comes up when we talk about Jesus's open invitation is whether everyone gets picked. The question they asked in the apostle Paul's time was, do non-Jews get picked? They called

non-Jews “Gentiles” but what they meant was everybody who wasn’t Jewish or wasn’t allowed to be Jewish. But it was a big question. After all, God’s big covenants were with the Jews. Jesus was a Jew, Peter was a Jew, Paul was a Jew, most of his followers were probably Jewish, so the big question was “do Gentiles get picked”?

In our time, we ask the question about gay people, “Do gay people get picked?” It’s the same question people have been asking since before Jesus was born: who gets picked? Here’s the thing: God’s the one with the invitation list. God’s doing the picking. None of us has a copy of that list. But it’s clear in scripture that anyone who wants to be on Team Jesus is being picked.

“The gospel [– the good news –] is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile ... There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Jesus is saying, “You. I pick you.” And there’s nothing like knowing you’re wanted and loved to set you free.

And there’s nothing like knowing you’re wanted and loved to make you want to give love back. There’s nothing like knowing you’re wanted and love to make you want to give love back.

How do we love Jesus back? As people who are on Team Jesus, as people who know we are among the Kids Who Get Picked, we can love Jesus back by making sure that others know they’re Kids Who Get Picked too. We can love back by extending His welcome to everyone we know. And everyone we don’t know.

It’s easy to assume that everyone already knows about Jesus, and his love, and his healing, and the freedom that he offers. If we just assume that people know that Jesus wants and loves them, even them, just for who they are, there will be a lot of people who feel left out. It’s like that girl in college who didn’t explicitly invite me to go to the mountains: without the explicit invitation, it’s easy to feel left out.

If we assume that people know the story of Jesus who was God who came to make sure that all of us knew we are loved and wanted and could be set free, if we assume everyone knows that already, there will be a lot of people who are left feeling unloved and unwanted.

The thing about welcome is this: if no one invites you and tells you you’re welcome, you’ll never feel it. And if no one shows you God’s love, and tells you it’s God’s love, you’ll never know it. And for folks who have felt rejected or unwanted a lot, or who have serious struggles in their souls and in our lives, they need to be invited over and over to know the invitation is real. They need to be reminded over and over in words and action that they are loved, and wanted.

Because there is nothing like knowing you’re wanted and loved to set you free.

As people who know Jesus, who know he said “you” and meant us, as His church, His team, we have a task. It’s the same task he had, the same task Paul had and Peter had. It is our task to make sure that everyone knows they’re loved, and welcome, and wanted.

This year as a church we decided to make our welcome explicit. We decided to let God be in charge of the invitation list, and to spread our welcome as widely as we could. We decided that love and joy and respect were part of our core values, and that we were really open to whomever wanted to play on Team Jesus. We are applying to be part of the Open and Affirming program of the United Church of Christ, which just means we’re telling people that we welcome all, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, who are some of the “Gentiles” of today.

Because the only way to make sure that people know, is to tell them, and to invite them, and to show them. One at a time. Over and over again.

Because there's nothing like feeling like you're not wanted.

And there is nothing like knowing you are.

Look around: is there someone who isn't here today? Call him. Call her. Tell them you missed them. Even if you don't know their names, or were never really friends, pick up a directory and call them anyway. Do it as soon as you get home. Tell them you noticed they weren't here, and that you want to see them. Invite them to coffee, or on a walk. Most important, tell them Jesus loves them, and wants them. And that you do too.

As Kids Who Get Picked, as those already playing on Team Jesus, can we make sure that we carry on his work of welcome? When someone is telling you how much she hurts, tell her "Jesus loves you."

Or if you know that for someone life is hard right now, call him up and tell him "Jesus loves you."

Or that they've been rejected, or that they're dealing with illness or addiction, or that they just don't feel loved, will you take a minute and look at them, and say, "God in Jesus loves even you. You. He picks you to love, and I do too."

And then invite them to feel the love in prayer. Or invite them to coffee. Or invite them to come with you.

Because there's nothing like knowing you're loved and wanted to set you free.