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John 15:9-17

ELITE ATHLETES

Before any big game, it is common for the coach to assemble her team together and give them some final words of instruction and encouragement. That is essentially what Jesus is doing in our reading today. The passage we read today is part of Jesus' farewell discourse before he is arrested and crucified. He knows he will soon be leaving his followers so he offers them some final words, private remarks for his followers, before they are sent out into the world without his physical presence.

More than two thousand years have passed since that private conversation between Jesus and his followers, but you and I should not let a couple thousand years keep us from joining in on that conversation. After all, we are also Jesus' followers, so his message is also directed to us. So join me in mentally pulling up some chairs to sit among those first twelve disciples because Jesus is talking to us all.

One of the things Jesus tells us is that we are his friends. His friends. That implies a level of intimacy, a deeper kind of relationship, a relationship of trust. And then Jesus tells us that he *chose* us to be his friends. We might think we chose him. We might recall the day when we were baptized, or confirmed, or when we accepted Jesus Christ in our hearts, but Jesus tells us that long before that, *he* chose us! He says, I chose you.

Now when you think about that, this may be a very good thing. Because if it were only up to us to choose Jesus, if it were up to us to follow him faithfully, to live out his commandments, to trust him, to serve him, well then, we would fail. All would be lost. Because truthfully, we just don't choose Jesus all the time. Lots of times we choose ourselves. Or we

choose popularity. Or we choose money. Or we choose convenience. Or we choose success. We don't choose Jesus all the time. But thankfully, Jesus tells us that he chooses us. He chooses to love us. And he chooses us to be his friends. And, as he tells us today, he chooses us for a special mission, a special task.

This is where we lean in close, with all the other disciples, because we want to hear what this special mission is. Jesus tells us that since we are his friends, he is going to let us in on some inside information. He says to us, "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." As friends of Jesus, we get to know the plan. We get to hear the inside scoop. We're the insiders.

So here we are, designated as Jesus' special friends, poised to get the inside scoop from Jesus. He tells us that he has chosen us for a special mission. And that mission is . . . wait for it . . . : *to love*. We are chosen to love.

At hearing this maybe some of us sit back in our chairs a bit disappointed. Aw, we think. To love! That's easy. That's sentimental baby stuff.

Except, Jesus adds something important to that instruction. He states that we are to "love one another *as I have loved you*."

In our culture, love is a sentiment, love is an emotion. But the biblical concept of love is much broader than warm emotions we might feel toward our closest family members or friends. When Jesus said we are to love one another, he was speaking about loving with God's kind of love—a steadfast, determined, act of the will.

When Jesus tells us that we are to love one another as he has loved us, we are prompted to consider how we have seen Jesus love. In the Bible we see Jesus include the social outcasts, the despised, and the rejected. In the Bible we see Jesus forgive people who did wrong things,

and forgive even the people who hurt him, betrayed him, abandon him, kill him. We witness Jesus feed the hungry and heal the sick. We see him stand up for the oppressed. Jesus tells us in this private conversation today that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends,” and then before too long after this conversation we see him do just that. Jesus’ way of loving is to give himself away, even his life. Jesus’ love was a strong, enduring, inclusive, compassionate, forgiving love.

That is what you and I have been chosen to do. We have been selected for this hard but important task of loving. That is what the whole purpose of our lives is about: to love others with Jesus’ kind of love. That's the inside information we've been let in on. The point of your life is to love with Jesus' radical love. Every choice we make, every decision we are faced with, every task we undertake, every plan or vision we pursue should be put to this test: does it fulfill the commandment to love?

Jesus knows that loving this way will transform us and will transform our world. He knows that it is the most important thing we can do in life. But he also knows that to fulfill this mission will take a lot of work and determination on our part. This. So he comes to help train us for this mission.

The highest level of athlete, those that go on to the Olympics, those that become professionals in their sport, these highly trained athletes are referred to as “elite athletes.” These athletes are single minded in their focus and determination in performing at their best. Their entire lives revolve around honing their skills and talents for the one purpose: to perform their sport at the highest possible level.

What we hear Jesus telling us in this passage today is that you and I, his followers, are called by him to become elite athletes for love. Jesus’ life, his teachings and stories, his own

example were offered in order to train us to become elite athletes for love. How elite athletes love is very different than how amateurs love. The amateur way of loving loves only in return. The amateur way of loving cares for other people only when it is convenient. The amateur way of loving is measured, careful, and proportional to how they themselves are treated. If the amateur is hurt by another or angry with another person, the amateur might hold a grudge or even walk away from the relationship altogether.

But Jesus has chosen us to love differently. It is the mission he has given us to do in our lives. And it will take all the practice and determination we can muster to fulfill this mission. To love our enemies. To forgive when we are injured. To remain steadfast and not walk away from relationships when they become difficult. To care for the stranger and to give our time and resources and energy to others, even for people we don't even know, so that God's realm of justice and peace might be realized.

This is our mission. Here we sit, the 12 disciples, and us, and 2.1 billion others around the world who claim to be followers of this man Jesus. Here we all sit together, having received the inside information about what our lives are supposed to be about. We've been chosen to be Jesus' superstars of love. Imagine if we all really did practice love at the highest possible level. Imagine what the world would look like if the followers of Jesus, all 2.1 billion of us, really did live out the mission for which we have been chosen.

One of the central characters in the historical drama *Chariots of Fire* is the Scottish Christian athlete Eric Liddell. In the film, Liddell is training for the 1924 Olympic Games but must navigate the displeasure of his sister who disapproves of his running and wants him to return to China as a missionary. Liddell finally confronts his sister, telling her he will return to his mission work in China but only after he runs in the Olympics. Liddle explains to her, "When

I run, I feel God's pleasure." Training his body and running to his fullest capability was Liddell's way of honoring God.

We honor God when we strive to do the difficult work of love. Jesus even gives us reason to believe that we too may feel God's pleasure through our efforts to love. In this conversation, Jesus explains to us that he has given us these instructions about love "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." The joy Jesus speaks about is not the kind of joy that comes when life is good, when there are no problems or difficulties, but rather the joy that comes from having our lives reflect the goodness of God. It is the joy that comes when we feel God's pleasure.