

*To Be Chosen**

Mark 1:9-11 and Ephesians 1:3-10

Werner Ramirez

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York

When I was in seminary, I got a text message from one of my former students, Tayci. I knew Tayci from my time as a youth pastor in California. The text message said, “Hi Werner, I hope everything is going well, and hey, can I ask you a favor?”

I left Good Shepherd for seminary right before her freshman year of high school. She was now a junior in high school and had moved to Colorado. When I saw that she wanted a favor, I assumed she probably wanted to start on college applications and wanted to put me down as a reference. I’m used to that request, but I know better than to agree to a favor before knowing what it is. So, I responded by saying, “Hi Tayci, I’m doing well. How are you? What can I help you with?”

“I’m awesome, I just joined a new church in Colorado, and I’m swimming hard with my swim team. Now for the favor: I want to get a tattoo, but I want it to be very meaningful, and I remember you always said that if you remember anything, remember that you are loved. So, I want to get “remember you are loved” tattooed, but I want it to be in Hebrew. Do you by chance know how to translate that?”

I responded by saying, “Ahhh, very interesting. My Hebrew is not the best. Trust me. You do not want me translating something into Hebrew, but most importantly, have you talked to your parents about this?”

“Oh yeah, they’re totally cool with it!”

Now, taking the whole tattoo idea out of the scenario, I was absolutely ecstatic to know that she still remembered those words, “you are loved.” Every time we had youth group, I would say that to them because I wanted it ingrained deep in their brains. I wanted them to have the knowledge that they were loved by the God of the universe. My hope and prayer was that the Holy Spirit would take that head knowledge and turn it into heart knowledge, that as they journeyed on in their faith through the highs and lows of life, that they would know that deep in their hearts they were loved.

When it comes down to it, I believe that a lot of my theology and philosophies around ministry and practice began with the message that we are loved, and that through the grace of God, we are enough. If you have been around Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in person or online, I’m sure you have heard me utter the phrase “You are loved, and you are enough.” That phrase became essential for me too in college when I read Henri Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved*. It then developed further during my time as a co-pastor at Kingston United Methodist Church, a small quirky congregation in Central New Jersey that I hold dear to my heart. At that congregation, I was reminded that not only are we loved, but that because of grace, my worth is not contingent on what society sees as worthy, a society that says you are only enough when you have that job, when you get that A on that paper, or when you look a certain way, or that you are only enough if the pain goes away. At Kingston, I was told that because of grace, we are enough. *We are loved, and we are enough.*

Now, I need you all to know that “You are loved, and you are enough” is not a tagline for me. It’s not gimmicky. It’s because I really believe it. We genuinely believe

that the God of the universe, that the God incarnate in the person of Jesus, knows you by name, knows your strengths, your weakness, and that God calls you God's beloved, claims us as enough, and proved it by dying on a cross and resurrecting three days later.

"You are loved, and you are enough" is not simply a comforting phrase for me, but it is profoundly theological. It affirms the *Imago Dei* in us. It affirms the image of God in us. Scripture claims that we are all created in the image of God. We are God's handiwork, God's piece of art. We believe God is love.

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says, "We have been made by love and for love....God's love for us is gratuitous; we do not merit it. It is a gift we receive before we exist, or, to be more accurate, a gift in view of which we have been created. Gratuitousness thus marks our lives so that we are led to love gratuitously and to want to be loved gratuitously."

I mentioned that my exploration on this began in college when I read Henri Nouwen's *Life of the Beloved*. The book's premise begins with Henri Nouwen describing his friendship with a man named Fred, a reporter from *The New York Times*. They became great friends and have different spiritual convictions. Nouwen was a Catholic priest, and Fred was what Nouwen calls "a secular Jew." In the midst of their friendship, Fred challenges Nouwen by asking him to write something for him. Fred says to him,

You have something to say, but you keep saying it to the people who least need to hear it....What about us young, ambitious, secular men and women wondering what life is all about after all? Can you speak to us with the same conviction as you speak to those who share your tradition, your language, your vision?

Speak to us about the deepest yearning of our hearts, about our many wishes, about hope; not about the many strategies for survival, but about trust; not about new methods of satisfying our emotional needs, but about love. Speak to us about a vision larger than our changing perspectives and about a voice deeper than the clamoring of our mass media. Yes, speak to us about something or someone greater than ourselves. Speak to us about...God.

So, as Henri Nouwen contemplates what to write, the word that keeps popping into his head is the word *Beloved* and the image of Jesus' Baptism, where a Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, and with you, I am well pleased." And I agree with Nouwen when he says that God says the same thing to us, "You are my son, you are my daughter, you are my child, you are my beloved, and with you, I am well pleased."

I am not saying that we rank equal to Jesus. Jesus is God the Son, God's Son, but as adopted children of God, we are still called God's beloved children. And once we begin to discover that we are God's beloved, that we are loved, we just want to know more and more. Nouwen says, "It is like discovering a well in the desert. Once you have touched wet ground, you want to dig deeper." One of the ways Nouwen describes our belovedness is by reminding us that God has chosen us. God has chosen you to be God's. What does it mean to be chosen? To be chosen is a very special

thing. Think about a time that you have been chosen.

In the summer of 1999, I was selected to kick a soccer ball at halftime of a Women's World Cup match. I was one of two kids selected out of thousands to kick in the Allstate One Million Dollar Kick. And let me tell you, I was a very excited 13-year-old. I remember answering the phone, and they asked for Werner Ramirez. Whenever I picked up the phone and they asked for Werner Ramirez, I always asked if they wanted Junior or Senior because my dad's first name is also Werner. They never actually wanted to talk to me, but I thought it was always funny to ask. Yet, this time they said they wanted Werner Ramirez, Junior.

They asked if I remembered entering this contest for one million dollars at a LA Galaxy game. I totally remembered because I got a free key chain out of it. So, I passed the phone to my mom, and she did not think it was real, but sure enough, I was selected for this kick. I was chosen. I felt special.

They flew my family and me out to Chicago. We stayed in the nicest hotel I have ever visited. All the meals were included. They gave me \$500 spending money, and everywhere we went, we were taken in a limo. Alexi Lalas, a famous soccer player, was my coach for the week! It was all so cool.

The morning of the kick, we were on Good Morning America. Robin Roberts interviewed me, and George Stephanopoulos said my name. Later on, we had a media session, and there was interview after interview at Navy Pier. I kept making my practice shots. I was big time. The night came, and Soldier Field was a sell-out for the USA vs. Nigeria match. More than 65,000 people were there, and I assumed most people would leave at halftime to get nachos and stuff, but when I walked onto the pitch, I looked up, and I swear, nobody left. This kick was also live on ESPN 2, which meant that my family and friends were able to watch. The shot was twenty yards from the goal that was covered by a tarp with a hole in the middle, two inches bigger than the ball. If I made it in, I would win one million dollars. I went up for my kick, I said a little prayer, and the ball went wide left.

But here is the cool thing, yes, I missed the million-dollar kick, but I got a \$25,000 consolation prize—not too shabby for a 13-year-old. I thought God had given me that money for college, but in 2004, immigration came calling, and after a nasty deportation scare, we were able to use that money to speed up our green card process. I knew God had given me that experience so that we could stay in the country, but that's a different sermon.

The point is, that week I felt special because I was chosen. I was on TV. I was treated like a celebrity. On the flight back, Andrew Shue was on our flight. My cousin who came with us recognized him as an actor on *Melrose Place*. I knew him as a player on the LA Galaxy. As we stepped out of the plane, he told me that he was lucky to *meet me* in person. I was special that week because I was chosen for the Allstate One Million Dollar kick. There is something extraordinary when one is chosen.

Friends, I'm here to tell you that you are chosen as well. You have not been chosen to kick for a one-million-dollar kick but for something far greater. God has chosen you to be God's beloved! You have a name that someone named you, and you also have another title: Child of God. God has chosen you, and you are special. You have a story, and that story is important. Your story is your own, and it is also part of God's incredible story, and you cannot be replaced. God has chosen you because God created you, and God loves you. And this *chosenness* that we have is not like

being chosen for the football team where someone else does not get chosen. “To be chosen as the Beloved of God is something radically different. Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness. It is not competitive, but a compassionate choice.” The first step in discovering our belovedness, in discovering that you are loved and enough, is knowing that you are already there. It is the head-knowledge of it. You have already been picked. You have already been taken. You have already been chosen.

This is a lot easier said than known and felt. It’s hard to embrace our belovedness when we are surrounded by messages that tell us otherwise, and that is a real spiritual struggle. So Nouwen gives helpful tips to remind us of our belovedness. The first one is unmasking the lies that the world says about you. This world and people judge you by your performance, by your looks, by your success, and we are sometimes made to feel worthless. Nouwen simply says, “When you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to say to yourself: ‘These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am a chosen child of God.’”

I remember being in about second or third grade, and I was on a soccer team called the Purple Punishers, and we had a playoff game that went into shoot-outs. For as much as I love soccer, I was not good at playing the game. At the shoot-out, I was placed to kick last. Shoot-outs are typically five shooters for each team; the one with the most goals wins. If it’s still tied after five shooters, it goes into sudden death. One player from each team goes until the tie is broken.

During this match, the tie did not break, and it went to the eleventh kicker. The eleventh kicker is the last one before the rotation starts over again, and typically the eleventh shooter is the least confident penalty taker. The other team shot first, and he made his shot. So, it was my turn. If I missed, we would be eliminated. If I made it, the game would continue. I had never scored a goal in an actual match before, and I was terrified, but I got up and scored a perfect penalty kick right in the upper left corner. And as I was cheering, I looked around, and all of the sudden, I saw my coach and the other coach yelling at each other, and then parents started to get involved.

I learned that the other team did not want my goal to count. The rule is that only the players on the field at the end of the game are allowed to participate in the penalty kicks. The other team did not want my goal to count because they were not sure if I was on the field or on the bench before the last whistle.

I started crying, and I remembered running off to my dad and saying, “They don’t think my goal counts,” and that was the first time I saw my dad cry. He started crying, and he said “No, Mijo, your goal counted. They might not think it counts, but if you did not score that goal, then nobody would be arguing, and the team would have lost. Your goal counted.” Friends, even when we feel like we do not count, we have to unmask the lies and remember that we do count. We have been chosen. We are God’s beloved.

My dad reminded me that night that I counted, and that is the other tip Nouwen gives us: to look for people and places where truth is spoken and where you are reminded of your deepest identity as a chosen person. Friends, here at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, we will do our best to remind you that you are loved and you are enough. And, I encourage you to surround yourself with folk that do the same. When Simone Biles withdrew from some competitions these past Olympics for mental

health reasons, she received some terrible criticism on one side. On the other side, she received encouragement from others, and she decided to hear the truth over the lies. She tweeted, “The outpouring love & support I’ve received has made me realize I’m more than my accomplishments and gymnastics, which I never truly believed before.”

And one of the beautiful things about knowing that you have been chosen, knowing that you are loved, is that you begin to see the chosenness in those around you in the pews, in your neighbors, in the marginalized, even in the people who annoy you the most. You’ll begin to see the chosenness in them. You begin to recognize the image of God in them and that they too are beloved children of God. Too often in our society, we tell certain people that they are not loved and enough. When racism is at play, we tell certain people they are not loved. When people are not fed, we tell the hungry they are not enough. And yet, one of the jobs of the Church is to flip 180 degrees on that lie and remind people in word and action, that is not true. When we at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church have honest conversations about racism and participate in anti-racism, it’s because we want to remind all people that they are loved and enough. When I see Rodrigo, our caterer, John Sheehan, our Director of the Ecumenical Outreach Partnership, and their team give not only meals but also genuine human interactions, they remind people that they are loved and enough. We have been made by love and for love. Justice is love in action.

So friends, my fellow beloved children of God, may you know deep down in your heart, soul, and mind that you, and your neighbor, are deeply loved, and by the grace of God, you are enough.

Will you please affirm our faith together with a question from the Presbyterian Catechism. I’ll pose the questions, and join me in the response.

Question: Who are you?

Answer: I am a child of God.

Question: What does it mean to be a child of God?

Answer: That I belong to God, who loves me. Amen.

Note

This sermon was preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (online) on August 29, 2021.