

I closed out 2020 completely lost in a *Friends* marathon. I don't know what it is, I think possibly something about my brain finally and completely being at max capacity for processing new or stressful information. My brain is like, nope, no more new, no more heavy, let's just sink into something familiar and happy and funny and comforting and I don't know...safe. *Friends* has been my go to for that since I was like ten years old. There's something about just letting my brain be awash in jokes I've heard hundreds of times but never cease to be funny, about the familiar comfort of storylines that always resolve, about contentment in the form of holiday armadillos and leather pants and monkeys as pets that just allows the chaos of the outside world to ebb the tiniest bit.

I sat down to write this week with episodes on in the background, and this was one of those weeks where there just wasn't a lot kicking minus one little nugget that I couldn't wrap my head fully around to articulate, until I looked at the TV and realized that that little nugget was right in front of me. What makes *Friends* so good in some ways is that it's about these six people who *found* each other, who perpetually and continually *chose* each other, not because they have to but because they want to. While it's true that Ross and Monica are brother and sister, the rest of them are family because that's who they built themselves to be, not because that's what life dictated. The six of

them carved out a life for themselves when on paper it probably doesn't make a whole lot of sense. The kooky masseuse who sings about smelly cats, the fledgling actor, the cleaning obsessed chef, the guy with a sarcastic quip always on the tip of his tongue, the woman who walked away from all the safety and security she ever knew to start over, and the guy who seems so put together but is really just obsessed with dinosaurs. They don't make sense when you lay it out like that. These are not people you would look at and go, oh they will totally be roommates and best friends and couples who walk through births and deaths and countless Thanksgivings and heartbreaks and weddings together no matter what. It doesn't compute and yet that's what makes it great. They love each other, because that's what they have chosen to do, because for some reason that only they understand, they know that their lives fit together and work even when sometimes they go a little haywire and don't always make sense.

Right in front of me was the reality that I was watching this show about found and chosen family and that was the same thing that kept kicking in my head from the lessons. I had written it in big, underlined letters in my notes: *chosen family*. And yet, I didn't know what to do with it until I recognized that that exact thing had been what was bringing me joy and comfort and laughter in the waning days of the year that was 2020. And so

we dive into this New Year, this new cycle around the sun, this new set of 365 days ahead of us on this note, the idea, the promise that we are God's chosen and found family.

We don't really know a ton about the context or the reasoning beyond why this letter got written to the people of Ephesus. We honestly don't even really think that Paul himself wrote it, but that it was written much later by one of his disciples. Usually these letters get written with a specific idea in mind or to address a specific problem, but Ephesians just kind of *rambles* its way through a conversation about light and darkness, about adoption and inheritance, about boundaries created and shattered. There are some that even think this letter wasn't written specifically to the people of Ephesus, but to the whole church to try and provide guidance about the community, the life that they were trying to create.

I mean think about what all of these new churches and communities were trying to do. In a world that was built upon hierarchies and divisions, rich and poor, patron and client, slave and free, Gentile and Jew, male and female, the church of Christ was trying to carve out a space where none of those things mattered anymore, where it didn't matter how much money you had or where you lived or how you looked, what mattered was your identity as a child of God. All the differences were wiped away in the face of that

one thing, and so these wildly diverse groups of people could gather together and be bound to one another because they believed and trusted that God had *chosen* them. In a world like theirs, this would have made no sense.

Division and difference is what made the world make sense, it helped you know who was in and who was out, who was acceptable and who should be shunned, who to talk to and who to ignore, and here comes this new group of people who dared to say that the only thing that mattered was that God had chosen them to be God's family, to be family to one another. It's ludicrous and doesn't make sense on paper, and you could imagine on their worst days when they're experiencing persecution and hardship, the pull would have been there to hunker down into their old habits, to pull together with what they know, with what makes sense, because that was safer and easier to explain to the world around them.

It is into that world of chaos and complication, of building new and hard things that the writer of Ephesians boldly reminds the church of one solid thing: God chose them in Christ *before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in love*. God chose them before the foundation of the world. They are God's found family. They are God's chosen family. This is always who they have been. This is always who they were going to become. God's people. Think about how that had to have felt to hear.

When all they've ever known is what divides them, what makes them different from each other, what the next rung on the ladder was that they needed to attain to be better or more acceptable, God chose them...exactly as they are. God chose them as family. God chose them to be family to one another, even if it makes absolutely no sense to the rest of the world.

I'm sure over the last few days there have been conversations in your households about New Year's resolutions, about the things you want to do to make yourself better, to improve who you are, to be the person God made you to be. But here's the thing...you already are. I mean sure, we've all got those goals...shed the ten pounds of Christmas cookies we've eaten, exercise more, expand our minds more, take up that hobby you've always wanted to do...and those are worthy and worthwhile goals, but they don't change the fundamental truth. You already are who you were made to be. God made *you* as you are, and God looked at that person and said...I want them to be part of my family. Let's face it, usually Nadia Bolz-Weber says it way better than anyone else does and this is part of what she tweeted on New Year's Day: "Your idea self doesn't exist. YOU do. Your actual, lumpy, shimmering, inconsistent self is the one that is loved and needed here." Yup. That's it. Who you are is who God created and who God chose, who God chooses each and everyday to love and cherish and call family.

And I know...we've all got those instincts. But I could be better. I could be different. I could be more put together. I could be less messy. I could be a bit more shiny. I could be a little less cranky. I could take a little less work. I could look different. I could be more of what other's want. I could be more consistent. I could make more sense. And I mean, maybe some of those things are true...but none of them change the fundamental truth that who we are are God's family, chosen from the foundations of the world. I want you to take that in...from the foundations of the world...

When God looked at the nothingness and void out of which God created this incredible universe of ours, when God was thinking about trees and oceans and tides and moon cycles and stars and comets and ecosystems, God was also thinking about...you. While God was imagining every last species that inhabits our planet, God also thought I want to create...them. This person with a little, specific glint in their eye color. This person who will have a full belly laugh. This person that will cry a little easier than most. This person who will be called to create art. This person who will have an incredible singing voice. This person that will be a dog whisperer. This person that will make a mean lasagna. This person who will love the smell of coffee but hate its taste. This person that will have a crooked smile. While plotting out the map and scope of the universe, God also mapped out

you, all because God wanted to call you family, to destine you for love, to destine you for exactly who you were made to be, even if that includes a few extra Christmas cookie lumps.

The truth of the matter is, none of us are going into 2021 without a few lumps, a few scars, a few things we want to fix along the way. However, none of us are going into 2021 as anything other than who were created to be either...children of God. God's family. When the world feels overwhelming, when the resolution list feels a little long, when the resolution list hits the garbage can, when the chaos of 2020 reveals it isn't *quite* done with us yet, frankly when life just feels hard...you are still God's family, God still chooses you, over and over and over again. That promise doesn't go away, it doesn't diminish, it doesn't become any less miraculous. Honestly, it kind of becomes *more* miraculous, because when we feel like we're the worst version of ourselves, God still says, uh huh, I see you and you are mine. Have a seat at the table.

I know the Friends theme song can be a bit of an ear worm so I apologize if it gets stuck in your head, but it's also kind of the 20th century version of God's promise to God's children, to *you*. I'll be there for you when the rain starts to pour, I'll be there for you like I've been there before, I'll be there for you...because you're my family and I chose you. **AMEN!!!**