

Have you ever felt out of place? Do you ever wonder if you belong?

I love sports. When I was growing up, I would play whatever sport was in season. One of my favorite sports to play is basketball.

When I was in the eighth grade I was cut from the basketball team. It was tough for me to swallow. During the summer between my 8th and 9th grade year, we moved across town, which meant I attended a different school for my 9th grade year. Throughout that year, I wondered several times if I fit in. I wondered if I really belonged. I wondered if I mattered. Have you ever felt that way?

When it came to try out for basketball again, I decided to do it and give it my best. I worked hard. I treated every practice as if it were my last. I went all out. I listened to the coaches and I learned more about basketball in those first two weeks of practice than I had ever learned before.

I left the last practice before the cuts were announced with knots in my stomach. I didn't know if I had made the team. I was worried. All I could do was wait.

That was tough for me. Waiting has always been tough for me. As I waited, I wondered if I belonged. I wondered if I fit in. ***Have you ever wondered if you belonged? Do you know what it is like to wait and wonder? Have you ever wanted to desperately fit in?***

If you have ever wondered about this, then our scripture lesson has something to tell us. Paul is telling us, that we are not alone. For when we commit ourselves to following Christ, we become a part of a much larger family. We become a part of a community of faith. We become a part of a larger movement that can help life be much more meaningful and fulfilling.

We are beginning a new sermon series today called *How to Build a Life: Discovering We Matter*. How do we build a successful life? If you listen to the messages of the world around us, the world

tells us life is all about you. Go out and get what you want. Go out and take care of yourself. I don't believe that is how we build a successful life.

Life is not about you. Building a successful life is all about discovering ourselves as a part of the family of God. Life becomes most meaningful, when we discover ourselves in God, living not for ourselves but for God.

Not long ago, someone sent me a great story via e-mail. It was about three boys in the schoolyard bragging about their parents. Each boy was trying to outdo the others. The first boy said, "My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a poem and they give him \$50."

The second boy says, "That's nothing. My mom scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, she calls it a song and they give her \$100."

The third boy says, "I've got you both beat. My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a sermon. And then it takes six people with big dishes to collect all the money!"

I love it. These boys may have misunderstood the power of their parents. But this story for me illustrates that together we can do a lot. Through such a simple thing as our being here, our identifying with the call of God in our lives, and the giving of our offering we are able to do so much that will really touch a hurting world.

When we learn to say yes to God in our lives, we become a part of a larger community of faith where our gifts and talents can be used to make a difference in this world. There are people in this room who have the gift of caring, you need to help all of us in the church care for each other. There are some in this room with the ability to see the future; you need to help us go where God is calling our church. There are some in this room with a passion for missions, you need to help us remember the importance of being involved in

missions and touching hurting lives in our community and in our world. There are some in this room with the give of music; you need to enhance our worship and our gathering times by using your gifts to remind us of Christ. Each of us is gifted and needed in the church.

Thank God, we are not alone. When we say yes to God in our life, we become a part of a larger community of faith, where we matter. When we say yes to God in our life, we become a part of a larger community of faith where we are needed.

I have long believed that God has given to each church what it needs at that moment in time. And the main gift God has given us is each other. Are you willing to see yourself as a child of God? Are you willing give your life Christ, and let God begin to work through you? Are you willing to take a chance?

Mary Schramm wrote a delightful book a number of years ago called, *Gifts of Grace*. In that book she tells a story of a time when her mother took a chance to let God's love shine through her. She says, "My mother lives in an apartment in Seattle. She shares a common laundry with 30 other tenants. One day, while doing her laundry, she noticed an elderly man across the room putting his coins in the dryer. He had obviously been crying. My mother went over to him and said, 'I've seen you in the building, but I don't know your name.' She introduced herself and then said, 'I notice you are crying. Is there anything I can do for you?'

"The man wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. 'Thank you, but no,' he said. As more tears started to come he looked at her and added. 'Yes, there is something but I don't expect you'd want to do it. It is one year ago today that my wife died, and in all that time no one has put their arms around me and hugged me.' With that my mother, Norwegian as she is, wrapped her arms around the stranger and both began to cry as they rocked in each other's arms.

"When my mother told me this story later, she did so with great embarrassment. 'I don't know what got into me,' she exclaimed. 'What if someone had walked into the laundry room and seen me with

my arms around a stranger! But somehow it just seemed like the right thing to do."

I believe it was the right thing to do. Mary's mother took a chance. She allowed God to work through her. She became God's gift to a lonely, hurting man. Likewise, you and I are called by God, as a part of the family of God, to let God work through us to touch a world that is hurting.

Back in the 9th grade, when I arrived at school the next day, and looked at the list, I realized I was fortunate. I made the team. My name was on the list. And while I was excited that I had made the team, I was mindful of those who hadn't. I had been there before. I sought them out. One of them, even became a close friend.

I also learned something else that year. It was that as much as I love this game, basketball didn't define me or anyone else. Our character does.

Today I urge you to look at yourself. If you are feeling alone, if you are wondering if you belong, give yourself to God. Invite God into your heart. Then allow yourself to become a part of this community of faith. And let work through you, with the gifts you have been given to touch those hurting in our world.

Amen