

Sermon Text – Sunday, July 15, 2018 – Pastor Paula Kraus

Scripture Ephesians 1:3-14 - Spiritual Blessings

There are a couple things about this scripture – in fact about this letter of Paul’s to the Ephesians – that we need to be comfortable with. First a little history.

As Paul writes to this group of believers, Ephesus is a city with an aging harbor, filling with silt and becoming useless. Its claim to fame however, is the temple of Artemis or Diana, bigger than the Parthenon in Athens and an attraction for tourists and worshipers. This shrine also served as a bank from which cities and kings deposited funds and obtained loans. The people in Ephesus worshipped money and they worshipped this building. You might recall from reading in Acts chapter 19 that Paul’s preaching in Ephesus caused rioting. The merchants felt a danger that they would lose their trade in silver icons of the goddess Artemis and the fear that people would stop worshipping at the temple and Artemis would be robbed of her divine majesty.

Paul writes to remind the people of this city that the church of Christ is a body, not a building. Christ’s church is people! People who are blessed in Christ, “God – has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”

People who are chosen to be “holy and blameless” before creation itself. God chose and created people, not structures, not things. This passage also does not claim that only some people were chosen – when Paul states God chose us it is all of us, not some of us.

This choosing is God’s eternal purpose, stressing relationship which God’s plan has always been. We were created in the image of God to be in relationship with God. We are created to be brought into the family of God, adopted as children of God, brothers and sisters to all of creation.

The people of Ephesus marveled at the creation of this Temple of Artemis, but this was a work of man’s hands. Paul is comparing the work of God’s hands, the church which was created and designed by God. His people who were created in his image, to be holy and blameless, beautiful, unique examples of God himself reflected in our lives. We are a much greater creation than any temple man has made. Therefore, we glorify God for his grace freely bestowed on all of us through Jesus Christ. I remember when I first joined a church in Louisville, the welcoming packet included a hand-mirror which had the word GLORY on a sticker at the bottom. GLORY stood for God’s Love Openly Reflected in You – it is a good thing to remember when we face the mirror every morning that we are created to openly reflect God’s love.

God has lavished on us his grace, wisdom, and understanding. He has made known to us the mystery of his will – when we get then to verse 10 we learn it is through Christ that the entire universe will one day find its full explanation and rationale. Christ is the source and sustainer of all creation, Christ is the head of all things in heaven and on earth. The secret to the mystery

spoken of in verse nine is Christ, and it is a secret that has been revealed to all – not just some. We are assured that God’s final goal in history is to sum up all things in Christ.

The tricky part in this scripture comes with verse 11, maybe if we read the New Revised Standard Version translation of this verse we would comprehend a little better. “In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, have been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will . . . “

Although Paul talks about being chosen, we have been chosen to display God’s grace and wisdom. I don’t think we can look at this passage and think that there are some who are not chosen. All humanity is chosen – nowhere in this scripture does it say God only chose some of us, that only some are destined according to God’s purpose. Paul does not intend to leave his readers with the impression that their salvation is predetermined and therefore they can’t decide for themselves.

Who doubts that our lives are in God’s hands? Who thinks God is going to willingly allow us to slip through his fingers? Some in this world will flee God’s comforting arms and wrestle away but that is the consequence of free will.

So, let’s talk about predestination the first of what we need to be comfortable with. There is a book titled “Jesus – Alpha & Omega” by Larry Wilson, available online through wake-up.org. Chapter five of this book talks about salvation and predestination and gives a pretty good example. “He [God] knows what our choices will be – not because He makes them happen, but because He knows what we will choose to do. Everything that happens is not, I repeat, IS NOT predestined by God. God did not predestine the rise of sin. Therefore, we should not interpret every event in life as a predestined event. God did not predestine Adam and Eve to sin, but He knew they would sin. In the same way the Father knows who will choose to forfeit eternal life.”

God chose us – humanity – to be the building blocks of his temple on earth, we are predestined to reflect God’s beauty and grace. For me, election includes all who are in Christ, universally, not just a ‘bouquet of believers’. I have heard it said like this “Whosoever will is elect. Whosoever won’t ain’t”

These words are from an unknown blogger, but I think they sum up ideas about predestination quite well.

“It might be a question of what we mean by "predestination". In the west, we have grown up and live within a culture of rampant individualism. The way we identify ourselves is not primarily as part of a nation or town or family (although those things might be important to us) but as individuals.

I am me... first and foremost... I [the writer of this blog] happen to be a husband and a father and a son and a brother... I happen to be a minister and a Christian and a Victorian and an Australian... but if any of those things were to change, I would still perceive the world and make decisions through the prism of "me."

That way of seeing the world is not necessarily the way people historically have seen the world, and it doesn't seem to have been the way when the scriptures were being written. For people in Jesus' time, you were first and foremost a member of your family. Your identity as son or daughter, brother or sister etc. completely trumped any sense of "self" you might have. It's why Jesus' mother and brothers feel like they're able to show up in the gospel of Mark and tell him to cool his jets and come home, and why it's such a shock when he says "Actually, my family is not this but that.

All of which is a very roundabout way of saying....

Maybe when we think about predestination, we're thinking too individually. Maybe God isn't that bothered in whether I choose one thing or another this afternoon but is very interested in how we - the body of Christ - spend the afternoon working for justice, hope and peace in the world.

Maybe God has a predestined plan for the body of Christ, for different nations, for the cosmos, and that plan is in action and unchanging. Maybe we as individuals have the invitation and the absolute choice to be joined into the body of Christ and join ourselves into the work of bringing forward that predestined plan.

Maybe by focusing on whether "I" as an individual have free will or not, we're focusing on the wrong thing. Or I could be wrong. It's happened before." (from a blog "REDDIT" posted 2 yrs. ago, author unknown)

Everything within the scope of God's creation is part of His plan. There is no aspect of sentient (or human) life outside the scope of reconciliation and nothing can frustrate God's eternal purpose. ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.

So – we aren't going to solve the debate over predestination or election, let's leave that to God. Our task is to worry about whether we are living up to the praise of HIS GLORY. The Church is God's living temple, constructed with you and I as the stones that exhibit God's beauty. Are we being the building blocks that God intends for his church?

We also need to be comfortable with what this section of scripture tells us about Salvation. This passage is easy to distort when we think about salvation. This text does not say that God predestined a number of people to be adopted, it does say that the process of adoption was predestined. Going back to that book by Larry Wilson, he states "If God predestines people to be saved and others to be lost, a Plan of Salvation would not be necessary. What is the point of choosing the Holy Spirit if you are predestined to be lost?"

Therefore, when we get to verse 13, Paul reminds us that we were included in Christ when we heard the word of truth and the gospel of salvation and we believed. As believers we have been marked with the Holy Spirit as collateral for the promise of eternity. To stay with the analogy of the temple, God is the architect of the temple [God's Church], Jesus built the temple with his life, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit has moved into the temple (our lives within the body of Christ) as a seal or mark of ownership to enable us to live to the praise of His Glory. We've already been saved, now the Holy Spirit has been given to us

[through our baptism] as a deposit to seal the deal. We only await Christ's return to receive our inheritance in full. Christ's return is the completion of God's plan.

You have heard me talk about living in the "right now but not yet". The kingdom of God is right now, brought down when God in the form of Jesus, came to live among us in human form, suffered and died for our transgressions. However, the kingdom has not yet been fully revealed until the redemption of those who are God's possession. God's inheritance is fully available to all – everyone who believes and has received the Holy Spirit to seal our fortune.

Our Christian lives should be to take possession of that promise of the kingdom, but to do that we must work. Let's remember however that it is work plus faith that makes God's inheritance fully available. Work *for* God that is not nourished by a deep interior life *with* God will eventually be contaminated by other things such as ego, power, needing approval from others, and buying into the wrong ideas of success and the mistaken belief that we can't fail. We become "human doings" not "human beings." Our experiential sense of worth and validation gradually shifts from God's unconditional love for us in Christ to our works and performance. Our activity for God can only properly flow from a life *with* God.

There is a new song out, "Dream Small" by Josh Wilson. The chorus goes like this "Dream Small, Don't bother like you've gotta do it all. Just let Jesus use you where you are, one day at a time. Live well, loving God and others as yourself, find little ways where only you can help. With His great love, a tiny rock can make a giant fall so Dream Small"

God has given us this grand gift of salvation, we have been chosen to be the building blocks of his kingdom on earth these are our spiritual blessings. What would this world, this community, this Church look like if we got excited about God's mission of love and mercy. Matthew 25:40 gives us this purpose "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Our ambitions don't have to be grandiose, just let God use you where you are!