

July 15, 2018 • 8th Sunday in Kingdomtide

BIND OUR HEARTS IN LOVE – SUMMER SERMON SERIES

“All Things Gathered Up in Christ”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Last Sunday we were focusing in on various mission involvements of our congregation. We celebrated the launch of the Habitat build and commissioned our 2018 Youth Service Project Team who departed yesterday and are worshipping today at Rayne Memorial United Methodist Church in New Orleans, preparing to begin their work project tomorrow.

This morning, the beautiful, expansive passage Matt just read for us from the Letter to the Ephesians, spans way out, the camera moving from up close detail out and out and out and farther out to the widest expanses of cosmic space, to the heavenly places as it reads. These verses have been called “a resounding song of hope,” its words reminding us again and again of who we are and whose we are, God's blessed children, chosen before all time, gifted with abundant life that we might live in the assurance of God's love for us and in faithful service to God's purposes in the world.

This is the Big Picture of life as seen through the eyes and heart of our God. And in these early Dog Days of summer heat, these words bring us cooling refreshment and joy, restoring our spirits and our hope. “Blessed be the Maker of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who, in Christ, has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places! Before the world began, God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless and full of love. God destined us to be adopted children through Jesus Christ--such was God's pleasure and will—that everyone might praise the glory of God's grace which was freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”

We might say that there are three movements in this passage, three concentric circles slowly moving forward and out. The first begins with our blessedness.

What a balm for worn and weary souls. There are so many things in life that get in the way of our sense of ourself as a beloved, blessed child of God. I know that for some of us it is very difficult to claim the blessing. There is sorrow and pain that you carry, some wound not healed, some shame or guilt, a sense of not being worthy.

The fact of the matter is, we all long to be loved. To know that our life matters—to someone, to God. As one writer put into words what all psychologists and counselors know:

“What do people want most out of life?

To be respected and to be understood

To be noticed and to be invited to participate

To be loved and to be longed for

To be needed and to be wanted

To feel loved

To feel like 'someone important' . . . to the people they love and care about the most”

To us this morning, the Scripture says:

“God destined us to be adopted children of God through Jesus Christ--such was God's pleasure and will—that everyone might praise the glory of God's grace which was freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”

“It is in Christ that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor given to us with perfect wisdom and understanding.” The author here heaps phrase upon phrase, one blessing upon another, perhaps fearing that unless we hear it repeated over and over again, we might not believe it.

Blessed. Chosen. Adopted by God. Redeemed. Forgiven. Bathed in grace.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, now retired, put it this way: “Many of us can acknowledge that God cares about the world, but can't imagine that God would care about you or me individually. But our God marvelously, miraculously cares about each and every one of us. The Bible has this incredible image of you, of me, of all of us, each one, held as something precious, fragile, in the palms of God's hands. And that you and I exist only because God is forever blowing God's breath into our being. And so God says to you, “I love you. You are precious in your fragility and your vulnerability. Your being is a gift. I breathe into you and hold you as something precious.”

May those words be a balm to our weary souls this morning and the key to the unlocking of our hearts. We are each a beloved child of God.

Now, the letter moves out to encompass a larger circle. For as important as God's gift for each of us is, the message of this letter is not individualistic. As beloved children, we are lifted into something much greater than ourselves alone. The letter speaks to us in the plural. Our blessedness is for the community of Christ. We are blessed in Christ, we are chosen in Christ, we are destined for adoption in Christ. In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, and our hope is set on Christ. [Karen Charokian in Feasting on the Word.]

And moving outward from there, the letter enlarges this community of Christ, in Christ, of which we are a part, to embrace the world. "With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of the plan through Christ, a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up and bring together all things in Christ, all things in heaven and things on earth."

Really? Are we listening carefully? Do we believe that? As hard as it may be for us to believe that we are beloved, it may be even harder these days to trust that all things will be gathered up in Christ. As one commentator notes, we're probably much more likely to observe that the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket. But if we press on to take this Scripture seriously, we cannot give up hope for any nation, any situation or circumstance, any neighborhood, or any one. We live in hope. And the hope in which we live is not some sort of pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking. It is our bedrock. It is our firm foundation. It is our deep and clear conviction that although, in this moment, we may but see in a mirror dimly, our trust is in God who made heaven and earth and who, even now, is working God's purposes out.

But, don't get up to go just yet. If we stop there, we just might be tempted to think: OK. I'm blessed. God's got this one. Guess I'll just go ahead and have another glass of iced tea...

Ah, but wait. Read all the way to the end. Listen again to the concluding verses which take us into the third movement of this beautiful passage: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the divine will and counsel, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of Christ's glory. In Christ you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption to a people who are God's own, to the praise of God's glory."

We, who have this amazing gift, this wondrous inheritance, we are to live FOR the praise of God's glory. We, God's own people, who have set our hope on Christ, we have heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation, we who are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit—we now pledge this inheritance to the glory of God.

We live, not in praise of the ways of this world, but for the joy of what God in Christ is doing even now to unburden sorrowing souls and lift up the downtrodden and outcast ones. The focus shifts from receiving blessing to being a blessing.

We are blessed to be a blessing. As Teresa of Avila said so long ago: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks with compassion at the world; yours are the feet on which he is to go about doing good; yours are the hands with which he blesses people now."

We are blessed to be a blessing, servants and shapers of the future God has prepared before all time. A future of hope and healing and fulfillment for all. Through the power and grace of our God, a future for our lives fulfilled far beyond what we now can see. A future for this world far different from the one our eyes now see. A future full of hope and righteousness and peace. All this is what God has blessed.

Near the close of worship today, we'll sing an old hymn from the 1860's: "My Life Flows On." May it ground our hope, increase our joy, and keep us open to the promise of God's saving love for each of us and for the whole world.

*My life flows on in endless song,
Above earth's lamentation.
I hear the clear, though far off hymn
That hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?*

Notes

Desmond Tutu. *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.

Robert Lowry. "How Can I Keep From Singing?" TFWS #2212

This sermon draws extensively on the work of Karen Chakoian and Edwin Searcy in *Feasting on the Word Year B Vol. 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

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