

“A Blessing, A Choice, An Inheritance”

Ephesians 1:3-14

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Friends, lets pray:

God, from before the foundation you choose to offer us grace beyond our wildest imaginations. Make the wealth of this inheritance be visible and our lives lived as songs of praise. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Some theologians say that there are two basic questions that exist about this letter: who wrote it and to whom? The words “In Ephesus” aren’t in some old manuscripts- leading some to believe this is actually a general letter meant for any community whose name could then be added in.

The letter claims to be written by Paul, but the people of Ephesus knew him well, which makes no sense with the way he addresses the recipients, let alone that the writing style and syntax isn’t like Pauline. Whatever the case, the content is truly Pauline and serves as an excellent summary of a Pauline worldview, one that gives shape to the universal significance of the Christian Faith.

Our passage starts off with a thanksgiving- a recognition of blessing. The source of the blessing is clearly identified as Jesus Christ. And the nature of the blessing are identified in two essential components. First, Christ is our source of agency for salvation and second that God initiated this whole circumstance.

Paul aims for us to be bedazzle, in awe, of our blessings in God through Christ. To accomplish this, we are Immediately linguistically thrown into the beauty and riches of which we are blessed. This is no haphazard action on God’s part but rather planned from the foundations of the world. We are a chosen people, Holy and Blameless, loved

and forgiven, redeemed through the Christ of all creation. In fact, many commentators reference this passage of Paul as “the excess of language of worship”-: words flowing endlessly in praise and wonder, trying through articulation to pull us into God’s ethereal presence.

At this point, if you came today hoping for some of my preaching through nature and my descriptions of the “excess of creation”- I am happy to let you know that you are about to be delighted.

There is something ethereal for me in the common aspen tree. Aspens are not native to my childhood home, so I grew to love them when we visited the Northwoods of the Midwest or even the Mountains of Colorado, specifically Aspen Colorado. There, as boys we would hike in the evenings in the Maroon Bells. I remember the coolness of the half-light between the mountains, the startling clarity of Maroon Lake, the smells of the afternoon rain-showers on ancient rockslides and damp soils. And then there were the woodlands of stark white-olive Aspen trunks, plumb in successive layers of beauty, their arm-like limbs extending out to hold millions of these beautiful shaped, slick leaves meticulously adorned with throbbing spider web veins and two-toned such that the wind makes the shimmer and quake. There is a reason that these ancient groves are the unsophisticated subject of multitudes of photographers: they are beautiful unto themselves. And no “excess” of rods can capture the blessings they whisper into the winds.

As a teenager in northern Wisconsin, I could not help but hike into the forest, lay down on a windy day, and just listen to the glorious wind moving among the quaking aspens. For me they are iconic to wildness and beauty and the presence of God.

So, when we were buying our home here thirteen years ago, I remember the moment I walked through the back door and into.... A yard full of pine and aspen. I was smitten! Rightly so, as on all side to us their knobby and contorted limbs reached over the grass

silently waiting to bedazzle. I was home; reminded of so many wonderful divine places and wrapped in their glory.

Ephesians is meant to remind us of God's love, really wrap us in joyous successive layers of language calling us to the excessive, tender, rich abundance that is the defining nature of our God. Ephesians has been a critical manuscript for generations of Christians in the ancient and modern Church. The letter as a whole is meant to fortify and unify our common existence as children of God in Jesus Christ.

Uniquely, In Ephesians, there are two essential components for unity to be fully theologically manifested. First, most specifically for the author at the time, was a progressive visibility unity of both Jew and gentile; that is, they were meant to gather and worship together as Christ being their common root. And second, and more completely, there must be a movement towards unity within all creation to offer God glorious praise.

And here is where the woods grow dark and mysterious: Paul claims that there is a plan, and that choices have been made.

*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. -Ephesians 3:8-10*

The plan for the remptive completion of God's work results is meant to offer us an opportunity to praise God's divine glory. But for us human beings, the existence of a plan simultaneously introduces the idea that we are not fully autonomous agents, we are not fully in control. God has a plan, and it is God's choosing, it is God's choice- to offer immeasurable and immutable love for creation. This is called Divine Election and makes us wonder what is lurking in the dark woods with unanswerable questions like:

Does this plan rob us of our free will and stymie our individual responsibility?

Doesn't the existence of election make God some kind of tyrannical and controlling deity whose heart is irrationally split and preferential?

For theologians like Calvin, Augustine, Edwards, and Barth: Ephesians makes clear that the nature of God's election is a statement about the wonder of God's Grace in Jesus Christ. If we focus singularly on the scope of this grace, we misunderstand that primarily this is an affirmation of the wild and unimaginable graciousness we come to know through intimate and untamed relationships with God's Son. Election is about the sovereignty of God's will, not what humans have done or not done. Divine election is sheerly about that which precedes faith itself and is the source of all that is, all that cannot be known, all that whispers and bedazzles- namely, God.

It is difficult, isn't it? To hold the truth of God's choosing while asking the troubling questions about our real, and really important, responsibilities in shaping the reality of creation?

Paul says that our response to these dualistic truths is found in our inheritance. One theologian says this:

*"Those chosen by God in Christ belong to God not because of blood or family; rather, God "destined us for adoption". Their inheritance is utterly gratuitous. Election is not a right but a gift. (Further) Christians are not "special" in relation to other people, but (God) calls them to specific tasks of serving God and neighbor, called not to privilege but to discipleship, to suffering, and to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, God calls that person to come and die."*

– George W Stroup.

One of the most beautiful and wild of the Aspen trees in my yard is just out our back window. Over the years I have come to love its spring catkins that clog my gutters such

that spring rains flood my deck. Those catkins then give way to bright gem-like green leaves that darken through the summer and once mature flutter in the breeze or hang utterly still in the doldrums of August humidity. Oh, and then there is the fall, those precious weeks where green gives way to chartreus then to- to splendid cadmium encrusted with brunt umber. How many breakfasts have I been graced with the those twinkling citrine gems hanging like a necklace upon an alabaster body.

This past year I had to make a terrible decision. A dead ash had fallen into my beloved Aspen and was dangerously propped against her shoulders. Come to find out, the Aspen was old, old enough that that her top was rotten and her trunk split down the center. So, I took her down. I cut her clean at the roots.

I saved her long straight pieces to place on the ground for future puppies to walk over. Her appendages and trunk are drying to firewood to keep us warm some winter. A few rounds sit in my yard upon which grass seed is poured. But it was a terrible choice that left me grieving her seasonal presence. Those rounds you see on your bulletin cover- that is all that remains.

You know we become so caught up in the choices we make, often terrible choices in grief filled circumstances, we forget the presence of God and the wild, beautiful, and loving choices our Creator in heaven *has already made which deem us as special and beloved and have made a way for life to be redeemed.*

Our scripture is counter to much of the world's teachings or visible evidence. It claims not special by our own labors, choices, or accolades. Rather, we are special because of our adoption in Christ, because of being engrafted into this magnificent all-encompassing reality. We are special because of the agency of Christ and God's initiative. We are special because God has already shared God's greatest riches- with all of us.

This is where Ephesians words, oh the language, is so very important. We are blessed, we are chosen, we are destined, we have obtained our Hope, and OUR hope is set on Christ. All these words are- plural. All communal. All- inclusive. These plural pronouns crown this blessing as one for the fullness of Christian community where we grow and flourish until we are fully engrafted into the ethereal throngs who praise God in heaven forever and ever.

Well, I have been mowing around that Aspen stump and in a bit of a slump; the backyard looks barren! This one tree somehow had its “roots” in me and I miss it terribly. And this rain, oh my goodness, for the first time since we moved here, I haven’t been able to mow because our yard is flooded!

So, look at your bulletin again, look at what now grows in the and high grass; do you see them? There are hundreds of them. It all started as just a few simple leaves poking their heads out of the watery grassy mess. Then they grew more leaves, now they are shin high- aspen trees. Hundreds of them. Where I have never seen them before, encompassing the now bleached white stump.

How vain I was, how uninformed; I thought my choice to cut down that Aspen would end its life. But before all that, she had grown deep clone roots, alive and well, an unseen foundation laid for a grove to spring forth-. Aspens form genetically homogenous colonies. Populus Tremeloides, or for the indigenous “Onondagas” people the “nut-kie-e” meaning “noisy leaf”, are ancient living organisms. One of the oldest and largest living organisms in the world is a grove of Aspens in Utah that is approximately 80,000 years old with 47,000 clone trunks, covering 107 acres and weighs 6,600 tons. Its named Pando and is a wonderful example of God’s divine hand as evidenced through the impersonal process we call evolution.

God chose, from the foundations of time, to lay an unseen groundwork for life to flourish and for your salvation to be complete. And God will gather all things together in due

time, things in heaven and things on earth, by Gods choice, a choice without restriction or grieve, free from human corruption or shortsighted gain.

Some say there the two basic questions about this worldview Paul has laid out for us today: Who wrote it and to whom?

But as your pastor I ask you two challenging questions: what lavish and excessive words will you offer to name the blessing showered upon you?

And, whom should you be inviting into a life of faith, the only rational response, a life of praise and worship and hope and trust?

We celebrate God's endless choosing of us, and we acknowledge the many difficult decisions we have to make and the responsibility we bear in this life. It is only fitting that our choices honor the choice which is our foundation and reflect the nature of our lavish still speaking God. So, I invite you to open your bulletins and join in the "Shaker town Pledge" which was written by our brothers and sisters of faith in the Shaker tradition which originally was a call for Christians to rectify the problems of wealth distribution but speaks very clearly to the blessing, choice, and inheritance that Paul encourages us to adopt as our primary worldview.

Let's join together:

Recognizing that Earth and the fullness thereof is a gift from our gracious God, and that we are called to cherish, nurture, and provide loving stewardship for Earth's resources, and recognizing that life itself is a gift, and a call to responsibility, joy, and celebration:

We declare ourselves to be world citizens.

We commit ourselves to lead ecologically sound lives.

We commit ourselves to lead lives of creative simplicity and to share our personal wealth with the world's poor.

We commit ourselves to join with others in the reshaping of institutions so as to bring about a more just global society.

We will seek to avoid the creation of products which cause harm to others.

We affirm the gift of our body and commit ourselves to its proper nourishment and physical wellbeing.

We commit ourselves to continually examine our relations with others and to attempt to relate honestly, morally, and lovingly to those around us.

We commit ourselves to personal renewal through prayer, meditation, and study.

We promise responsible participation in a community of faith.

Amen.