

8th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Today begins our journey through the Book of Ephesians since the Revised Common Lectionary is kind enough to guide our paths through it for the next seven weeks. As it turns out, we don't think that the Apostle Paul wrote Ephesians because most biblical scholars date the book to the last quarter of the first century and most also agree that Paul was executed around the years 66 or 67.¹ Therefore, most believe that Ephesians was written by a disciple of Paul who wrote in Paul's name. To be more specific, since Ephesians bears so much resemblance to the book of Colossians, some scholars have proposed that Ephesians was written by a follower of Paul who admired the book of Colossians and wished to make a commentary of sorts based on it. As a note of explanation, even though we will not take the stance that Paul himself wrote this letter, I will nevertheless refer to the author of Ephesians as "Paul" for simplicity's sake.

One of my favorite resources, my Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary, says the following about the Book of Ephesians: "its purpose is to expound on the blessings enjoyed by the Church, to stress the unity of the Body of Christ, and to encourage believers to walk in the ways of Christ."² I chose to do this sermon series on Ephesians for a few reasons. First of all, I tend to follow the lectionary and I enjoy seasons in the lectionary when it goes through an entire book of the bible. Secondly, the epistles are not my favorite thing to preach on, so this is an opportunity for growth for me as a preacher. And, thirdly and most importantly, I believe Ephesians' emphasis on Christian unity and steadfastness in the midst of social change could not be more relevant than it is right now!

So let's get right to it. Before I read today's passage, keep an ear out for two concepts that we're going to flesh out together: the concepts of adoption and inheritance.

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

¹Douglas, J. D., Merrill C. Tenney, and Moisés Silva. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Page 1092

²Douglas, J. D., Merrill C. Tenney, and Moisés Silva. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Page 424.

in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Although I don't have adopted members in my immediately family, I do have a cousin who happens to be adopted who lives here in Lexington. Her name is Tori, she's a freshman in high school, and she's pretty awesome. My aunt June and uncle Steve adopted her from China a little over 10 years ago and our family is more beautiful with her in it. Also, I have a close friend who, along with his wife, is in the process of adopting a girl named Juma from Liberia. Just a few weeks ago, this church threw a shower for Jane Ireland's two grandchildren who were just adopted from India. Adoption is something to be celebrated and cherished. Although I certainly do not pretend to understand what it is like to be adopted, and I do understand that that comes with its own challenges, adoption can be such a beautiful metaphor to speak of our relationship with God.

And that, my friends, is the opening metaphor of the Book of Ephesians. We have been destined, Paul says, for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ. We have been chosen, picked out, predestined to be a part of this family. That is what it means to be adopted into the family of God.

But adoption is not always an easy or intuitive transition. Putting away one life and taking on another is a complicated process, to say the least. And that is why it's so important that the Book of Ephesians emphasizes that we are not adopted members of God's family in isolation, rather we are adopted members of God's family in community with one another. Together, we are called to be holy and blameless, not that that is easy or even completely possible, but that we are to strive together to live into our new identities as adopted children of God.

Although we are talking about adoption in primarily emotional and spiritual contexts, the meaning of adoption back then was just as much about economics and finances. As it turns out, in the time that the letter to the Ephesians was being written, it was very common for adults to be adopted for at least two reasons. First of all, if you did not have a son to pass along your inheritance, you could adopt another man to be your heir. Once the adoption was complete, the adoptee enjoyed all the legal rights that a biological son would have. Secondly, if you, as an adult, were adopted by another family, the financial debt you had incurred in your life up to that point did not follow you. That's right, adoption gave you a financial "clean slate." That being said, I have still have a fair amount of debt from my undergraduate years so if any of y'all would like to adopt me, I'd be just fine with that! Needless to say, I don't think things work that way any more. But if we try to put ourselves in the shoes of those who were hearing this passage at the time it was written, we just might feel their relief upon hearing that they were adopted children of God. Indeed, today we might hear this Good News tellings us that God has freely bestowed upon us a clean slate in which our past sins do not prevent our future faithfulness.

After reminding us that we're adopted children in God's family, Paul then pivots to the next natural subject: inheritance. Hear again these words from today's passage: "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 Engaging the Text last week, as we were talking about this passage, I invited people to share with the group things that they have inherited. Some of us talked about pieces of furniture that we inherited from our families. Others talked about a chocolate chip cookie recipe that has been handed

down. Some of us have inherited our family bible, with pages marked up with years of notes and the front and back pages filled with dates of births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths. As for me, I recently inherited a cherry-wood dining room table that has been in my family for some time that was made right here in Kentucky. Upon my graduation from Columbia Theological Seminary, my dear friend Michael Morgan gave to me this copy of the Book of Psalms that was printed in London, England in 1626. Together, you and I will sing a hymn he wrote for my ordination four years ago when we gather in a few weeks for my installation - a kind of "sung inheritance," if you will.

No matter what you've inherited, chances are you received that inheritance because someone trusted you to care for it and share it with others. That chocolate chip recipe that belonged to your mother, and her mother before her, and her mother before her, does little good if it's never baked and shared. That hymn that my friend, Michael, wrote for the occasion of my ordination is nothing more than a sheet of paper that sits in a corner of my office if I never sing it and share it with others. That family bible that's been handed down to you means that you've inherited a story that needs to be told and passed down.

True and meaningful inheritances are never given lightly. And so, in the context of today's passage from Ephesians, isn't it remarkable that God would choose us, broken people that we are, to adopt and to call his own. Isn't it a beautiful, curious truth that God chose *us* to inherit the promise of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of God's son? Sometimes I want to look at God and say, "God, did you *really* think this through?" And in those moments, I imagine God looking back at me, winking, and saying: "yep."

Friends, what if each and every single day, you and I woke up and the first thing that went through our minds was this: "I'm adopted by God and I've inherited God's salvation. Now what am I going to *do* with it today?"

The Book of Ephesians is very clear on this point: we have inherited salvation through Jesus Christ, and the spiritual gifts that are bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit are God's means of passing that inheritance on to the next generation in ever wider and wondrous ways.

And, to take the model of Ephesians to its deepest roots, these inheritances are meant to sustain and share Christian unity. You see, we are meant to be unified and cohesive as a Christian family. Now, that does not mean that we are always going to agree on everything. Christian unity does not mean that we sit around and hold hands and sing kumbayah. Christian unity does not mean that we never take a prophetic stand that might challenge the way people think.

Rather, Christian unity, in the context of the Book of Ephesians, means that we are unified in a shared inheritance. An inheritance according to God's good pleasure as a plan for the fullness of time. We are bound in Christian unity when they will know we are Christians by our love. We are bound in Christian unity when we gather to share this inheritance of love and salvation with everyone, and I do mean everyone, we encounter. We are bound in Christian unity when we stop hiding behind the argument that politics don't belong in the Church. We are bound in Christian unity when we recognize that what is far more important is that we stand with our sisters and brothers who need the benefit of the inheritance of love we have received through no merit of our own.

You see, the church in Ephesus, towards the end of the first century, was moving from being predominantly Jewish to predominantly Gentile. I'm sure that many in the church who were of Jewish descent were uncomfortable with the new people coming to worship with them. Paul, in the Book of

Ephesians, does not tell the congregation to forget their differences. Rather, Paul encourages them not to let their differences prevent them from sharing their mutual inheritance as adopted children of God.

That, my friends, is the heart of today's passage. Together, let us claim our inheritance and use that inheritance to lead this world ever closer to its redemption, a redemption that has been promised to us by the life, death, and resurrection of our greatest inheritance, Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.