

Ephesians 1:3-14
Pentecost 7-B-21
"Getting Our Doxa Right"
Rev. Randy Smith

Artists, musicians, writers, philosophers have "**early**" periods in their creative careers. But then they change their *styles*, they become more *proficient*, more *skilled*, leading to more complex, more self-reflective work, etc., and we call this their "**later**" period, and their -- paintings, music, books, writings -- their "**mature**" work.

Well, the same is true of *theologians*, and in our case this morning, with the reading from Eph. 1, the theologian is Paul, a highly educated Jew born in 1st-c. AD Tarsus, in south-central modern-day Turkey. He called himself an "**apostle**", viz., one who was, he said, "sent out" by the *Risen* Jesus to be a theologian *specifically* to the "Gentiles" (viz., *non-Jews*; Gal. 1:16).

I **preface** this morning's sermon in this way because I want us to be aware that the Letter to the Ephesians represents the theology of the "**later**" or "**mature**" Paul. What we find here is the work of a man who, for many years, *mostly* wrote letters addressing the "**trees**", viz., timely and specific issues arising in those congregations to which Paul had a pastoral connection. Here, in Ephesians, he has moved on in time, and is now able to reflect on the whole "**forest**" -- the *big picture* of what God has done in the world, in human history, through Jesus Christ. So here his focus is "large, grand and cosmic" (Willimon). In Ephesians, we find Paul showing us, across the whole letter, what it is *all, finally, all about*, what the Good News, the gospel of Jesus Christ is intended to **bring about** in the life of the world. Beginning today, and for the next three Sundays, I invite you to join me in trying to hear and understand Paul's "mature" theology in this Letter, in the hope that it will help all of us become more "**mature**" in our Christian lives, and in our life and work *together* as the Church.

It is important to see that Paul's description of what it is *all, finally, all about* **begins** with **worship** -- or, more specifically, with **praise**. The passage we read this morning, put in our English Bibles into 12 *verses*, is, all 202 words of it, is a *single* sentence in the Greek of Paul's letter, one very long **eruption** of praise! When you praise God, when the praise of God is at the *heart*, the **core** of your being, where do you stop? So here, the *medium* is the *message*: there **are** no limits to the praise of God, for what God has done, is doing, will do in and through Jesus Christ.

This is where it all begins -- with this **acknowledgement**, not of what *we* have done, or *have* to do, but of what **God** has done.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has **blessed us** [here in this world] in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, *4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world* to be holy and blameless before him in **love**.

"Blessed" and "chosen" by God. That is who we are. This is our *fundamental*, unalterable **identity**. We are **blessed** by God, **not** -- as we typically say -- with business or financial success, or even by our families, or by our health. (Thinking in that way means that we are always surrounded by the "un-blessed".) We are rather blessed by with "every *spiritual* blessing in the *heavenly places*" *right here and now*, in our lives on earth, meaning that we have available to us all the "**equipment**" we need to serve the God who has blessed us in this way.

Chosen by God "in Christ". This is **not** about being chosen by God in the sense of being "predestined" by God to be among the "chosen". No. This is discovering that being "in Christ" -- becoming a part of all the new in the world God is bringing about through Jesus -- means we find ourselves now with *not only* a new *identity* but a **new story** to be a part of -- God's *own* story, a story which now *overlays* and *circumscribes* our lives. It's the story of a gracious God, who blesses, forgives, redeems, but whose **chief blessing** is that he **chooses, viz.**, loves and cares for us enough to provide us a story *to be a part of*, a story *on the basis of which* we are to relate with others in this world, a story that helps us **discern** what is good, right, true and just, **and** a story which delivers us from **captivity** to a countless number of other stories, stories which **corrupt** our understanding of what is good, right, true and just, and so **corrupt** -- or **misdirect** -- our **praise**.

What I mean is that we end up living, as Paul puts it (v. 12) **not** for the praise of **God's** glory, but for the praise of **other** things, *and* people, that **we deem** to be "glorious" or, i.e., of **preeminent importance** -- whether our nation, or our race (or, *sometimes*, our nation *and* our race, e.g., what has been termed "White Nationalism"), or *political* ideologies (e.g., "Liberal", "Conservative", "Libertarian"), or *economic* ideologies ("Capitalism", "Marxism", "Socialism"), etc. And when we import our **misdirected** praise of such things -- our prior, **competing** devotion to such things -- into the life of the Church, we will encounter some measure of **conflict**, because we will find our prior, competing loyalties challenged by the Bible's demand that our **first**, and **determinative**, loyalty be to God alone, and devotion to discerning and doing the will of God. And when this sort of conflict arises, it **works against the will of God**, which Paul says has been clearly "set forth in Christ", namely, "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things

on earth" (vv. 9-10), the Church -- composed of all, as Paul sees it, the "homeless" children of the earth now "**adopted**" as God's *own* children (v. 5) - - intended to be a **sign of the fulfillment of God's will** for the unity of **all** people, for **all** people to see, and want to be a part of.

I was led to wonder, e.g., around this last weekend's Fourth of July Sunday, about the church sign boards I saw as we traveled on vacation which read, "God Bless America". What I wondered was whether, instead of asking God to bless America -- which is the ages-old invocation of countless nations across the millennia (from the Roman Empire's "*Nobiscum deus*" to "*Gott mit uns*" of the Third Reich) -- we as the Church should rather challenge our fellow Americans on patriotic occasions by displaying the message, "America, Bless God!" (as Paul begins here, v. 3), as a way of making it clear to others that, while we love our country, our **primary** devotion is **not** to nation but to God.

By the way, the Greek word in the reading this morning translated "**praise**" is **doxa**. I am not charging you any extra for sharing this with you, because you actually already know it. It's printed in our worship bulletin every Sunday, *disguised* in the word "Doxology" ("Praise God from whom all blessings flow..."). It's also disguised in *another* important term in the life of the Church, "orthodoxy", which most people understand to mean "right **belief**", but which actually means "right **praise**". The Church has understood, you see, for a very long time, that you can't get *anything* about following Christ as a part of his Church right -- *least of all* belief -- until you get your **doxa** -- your **praise** -- right, *viz.*, rightly *directed* to, and *focused* on, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3).

So, the **first** thing Christians do is **worship**. It's *also* the **most important** thing we do. The very word, by the way, is based on the word "**worth**", meaning that "**worship**" is fundamentally the act of declaring the "**worth-ship**" -- the **surpassing** "worth" of God. We **come together** and we make the Church **visible**, to all of the people who drive by our place of worship on Sunday morning, and see whatever number of cars are there, *yes*, but actually more importantly, we make the Church **visible to**, and *for*, one *another*.

And then we do what? **We praise God**. With *music*. In *song*. Where else in our world -- apart from athletic events -- do people regularly gather and sing? Where else, in our divided, cynical, suspicious, angry society, **could** people, **would** people do this? But the Church does this. It's a *hugely* important part of our witness *before* the world of what our God is up to *in* the world, through Jesus Christ and, as Paul says, "the promised Holy Spirit" (v. 13).

We then read some part of the Scripture, in order to help us **remember** that *part* of God's story, and then the Preacher in a sermon tries to **reinforce** that remembering, and **display** what living on the basis of that story, looks like -- or **may** look like, **may demand** of us -- as the Church. And we do this *together, in person, even shoulder to shoulder*. Which is -- as we have all know -- what the Pandemic took away from us: no matter how many showed up to worship on Facebook Live, no one could see **anyone else** at worship except for those leading worship for the day.

We **need** the experience of being together as the Church, to **remind** others, and to be reminded **by** others -- in words, by smiles, by way of listening ears, handshakes or hugs, that we are *not* in this **amazing adventure** called "Church" *alone*, that we are all part of something much, much bigger than ourselves, and **much more hopeful** than the very best of efforts any of us could -- *ourselves*, on our *own* -- ever put forward.

It's when this hope, for *whatever* reason, begins to **fail** for us that we begin to seek for *hope* in **other** areas of life, begin to fall prey to the *promises*, the *lure* of **other** stories, begin to **direct and focus our praise** elsewhere in life. We begin to trust in our *own* wisdom, our *own* vision, our *own* ways.

Will Willimon remembers the time when, as a college student back in the Civil Rights era, he attended a **freedom march**. Many *other* students were present as well, and were energized to begin the planned march for justice for African-Americans. He says he was astounded to discover that, before any march would begin, the group was directed into a little, rural black Baptist church, and found themselves a part of **hours** of *singing, praying and preaching*. His fellow white students began to insist after a while that the group go ahead and move out into the streets, and get on with doing what they came to do. "What does all this **singing** have to do," they began to ask, "with **the work** at hand?"

The organizers were forced to explain to the students that the **worship** -- the **praise** -- was *essential* to accomplishing the work at hand, that the **real struggle** was not against a few bad laws or a few bad people, but against what Paul in Eph. 6 will label **spiritual "principalities and powers"**, what we might today see as "structural" or "systemic" forms of injustices, built into our way of life together. "If all we have to *sustain* us out in the streets," the organizers told them, "is optimistic humanism, then we won't be there long."