

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Tiffani Harris
Gathered In
Ephesians 1: 3-14
July 14, 2024

If you have ever felt spiritually left behind or weighed down by shame... If you look at the world and the future and feel despair... If you know what it feels like to be abandoned and feel of little worth... If you wonder about your purpose and how God sees you...then this Ephesians passage is for you.

These eleven verses are the preamble to the letter to the Ephesians and the beginning of Paul's very long prayer for them. However, it is a theological word salad, containing the longest run-on sentence in the Greek New Testament. With phrases like "God chose us beforehand in Christ to be holy and blameless in love," "He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing," "We are destined us for adoption," ...Glorious Grace...Redemption and forgiveness of trespasses... He goes on to say, Riches of God's grace, mystery of God's will, God's wisdom, and insight...Good pleasure, inheritance... all for the praise of his Glory, we marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit... Inheritance towards redemption as God's own people . . . Here, Paul is speaking with what we might call a thick theological accent.

It is really easy to get lost in all the words and wonder what this means to me. It's a lot to process; it is a lot to take in. The Apostle Paul is trying to convey the glorious work that God has done for us in Christ, and it is too grand to be described in one, short sentence. He hits every angle, providing multiple analogies because no analogy or metaphor on its own can fully express the good news of Christ.

In this, Paul is essentially telling the Ephesians: *Remember who you are.*

I wonder, if as a teenager, maybe you heard your parents tell you that same thing and ask you this question before you got out of the car or maybe before you left for the evening: "Remember who you are! You are a Harris. Or You are a Howell... Or You are a Kelley... You are a Cunningham... You are a (insert name here)... *Remember who you are.* You are a child of God.

It is a reminder for us of *Who you are and Whose you are.* Remember what you have been taught and who you belong to. When faced with hard decisions and pressure: *Remember your identity.*

In this passage, I want to highlight three moves and invitations that shape our identity in Christ. In verses 3-8, Paul writes, "God *gathers us in and has made us beloved sons and daughters*" *Going on to say*, God blesses us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. God chooses us in love to be adopted as his children. This grace of God is freely given. God's goodness and love are poured out on us. There is nothing we can do to earn this love or to lose this love. *To sum it all up: we are the beloved of God.*

Can you think of a time in which you knew that you were deeply loved, that you were beloved, that you belonged? For me, I go back to high school, I had youth group mentors, Bill and Anne,

who beautifully demonstrated God's love to me and to those of us in the youth group. I felt belonging because of them. Having no children of their own, they became the unofficial mother and father of the youth group. She taught the youth choir, and he was the jokester-- made everyone laugh. He flipped pancakes and she helped us find our voices in worship. They opened their home to our youth group, regularly inviting us in for home-cooked meals. They prayed for us and disciplined us joining us at youth camp and on mission trips.

There was something about their genuine love for us that made it unmistakable that we were important to them. Even today, I still receive birthday messages from Anne each year, reminding me that I am a dearly loved child of God. They embodied this message in Ephesians, and in many ways, we were their adopted children that they never had.

For the original Gentile recipients of the letter, it was welcome news to know that they, too, were God's children. This reality, that we are God's adopted children – you and me -- is beautifully demonstrated right here in this congregation in the ways that so many of you have welcomed others into your families. In the same way, many of us also have “adopted aunts and uncles, tia and tio” in the family of God. Maybe you, too, have experienced the joy of being the *one* who is adopted.

I have had the privilege several times of sitting in court with families as they formalize the adoption of their children. It is a moving experience as families commit themselves to a child for life. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and friends join in the courtroom for the occasion. The judge makes it clear that this is permanent, and the parents commit and agree to love these children as their very own. The beautiful part is the adopted child bangs the gavel on the desk and finalizes the adoption. The courtroom erupts in applause, laughter, and tears of joy. This is what God has done for us, too.

In verses 8-10, Paul describes for us the hope of God's will for all of creation. As God's adopted children, this love and belovedness is outward-focused. Not only is it hard for us to imagine God's lavish love for us, but it can also be quite difficult to see with the eyes of faith, to see what God is doing in the world. We do not always understand what God is up to.

So, we hear again, that God's will and desires are good, wise, and just. God shares wisdom and insight to help us see with eyes of faith, to help us see God's unfolding plans—plans not just for us but for the whole world. God is gathering ALL things in him out of grace and love. God will unite heaven and earth and all the diversity and all the challenges in between are slowly being knit back together. Later in Ephesians, Paul writes that the walls that divide us are broken down in Christ. It is God who created this messy diversity that we all live in. And it is God who guides us through it. And it is God who brings it all back around in the end.

When we look at the future, it can be easy to lose sight of what God is doing. There is no shortage of disturbing things happening in our world--just yesterday, the terrible news of political violence here in our own country. But before we see and think that all things are hopeless, we have to remember what Paul is saying here-- that actually nothing is hopeless: be it famine, violence, homelessness, division, or war – all can and will be brought in by God's grace.

Ephesians is painting a picture for us of an image of God holding the whole world in his hands. God's arms stretched out wide and ready to receive. It's an image of God **gathering in** all things, near and far. We can't give up hope on anyone or anything. So all this means: we lean into hope.

In the face of the news cycle or whatever trials are swirling around us in our own worlds, trusting God in this way is a defiant act of hope. Parker Palmer, a Quaker author and educator, describes hope as "*holding a creative tension between what is and what could and should be, each day doing something to narrow the distance between the two.*" Stubborn hope in Christ enables us to act in hopeful ways in a hurting world.

The third move Paul describes in verses 11-14 is that our adopted inheritance is lived out. Paul continually uses the first-person plural – us, we, and the plural you meaning God's grace and mercy are not just for ourselves—it's for everyone. It is far-reaching and all-encompassing. Living out this adopted inheritance is a plural calling. We are adopted and have an inheritance so that we might set our hope on Christ. We are blessed and called to live for God's glory. All this means: we have been given a purpose and an identity.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with this truth: "Humanity's chief aim is to know God and enjoy him forever" We belong to God and find our joy and purpose in living for Christ's glory. As Christians, we are known for our joy in what Christ is doing to redeem an aching world and suffering souls. The people of God collectively living for God's glory, has a ripple effect on the world, ultimately drawing others into Love. This is the inheritance – we have been given an inheritance of love.

A couple of weeks ago, I took a group of Truett Seminary students to the Christ in the Desert Monastery in Abiquiu, New Mexico. While there, we prayed and worked with the Benedictine Monks, soaking up as much as we could of their understanding of prayer and work. Near the end of our time there, after a long conversation about faith, prayer, and the monastic life, a student asked one of the monks, Brother Chrysostom, what he thought was most important for a group of Baptist seminary students to take back with them from their time in the desert. His response: *It is all about love.*

While we were there, we also met Brother Angelo, a Franciscan Friar who was visiting on a prayer retreat. He shared with us how God called him to a life of love and service, in much the same way that Saint Francis received a calling from God. He serves with other Franciscans in Harlem and the Bronx, ministering every day to those experiencing homelessness and poverty. It brings me joy to think about all those Franciscans, in their grey habits and rope belts, walking the streets of the Bronx and Harlem, sharing grilled cheese sandwiches, and playing soccer with children. They are living a different way of life. (You can check them out at franciscanfriars.com.) Another student asked Brother Angelo the same question: What is the most important thing for a Baptist seminary student to know about his faith and the Franciscan way? Brother Angelo responded, "*It is all about love.*"

Through Christ, we have an inheritance of love.

We all know it is not easy to live this out. When we struggle to internalize what it means to be God's beloved. When we do, so many things can go astray. I just saw *Inside Out 2* -- can't we all relate when anxiety, fear, anger (or insert your favorite go-to emotion) seem to take charge in our hearts and minds -- when we forget our identity...when we forget the inheritance we have in Christ.

Fear so often gets in the way of our trusting God's goodness and God's plans. And in our impatience, sometimes we dominate until our agenda is pushed through, neglecting the way of love in the process. We are tempted to forget that God is quietly gathering all things in.

Our actions often reveal what we truly believe in our hearts. When we look in the mirror of our lives, we might see a gap between how we behave and what we think we believe. As they say across the pond when you step onto the tube in London: "Mind the Gap." We must mind the gaps in our own lives. We mind the gap because in this gap, there is an invitation to live more fully into these promises of our identity in Christ.

Miroslav Volf uses the phrase "Belief-shaped practices" to describe how we live out what we believe. Our lives and our way in the world and our actions are shaped by what we believe about God and our identity that God has given us.

Let these words of Paul's veritable theological feast sink deep into your heart, overflowing into your hands and feet: You are blessed with spiritual blessings; you are chosen to be holy; you are loved; you are forgiven; and you are covered in grace. God's grace, goodness, and purposes are yours in Christ. You have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and God and have an inheritance of love.

God is gathering in *all* things. May we lean into that hope. This is our baptismal confession.

So how then do we respond to this love—this inheritance of love? A life lived in praise to God is the natural response. It is a life where love is internalized, changing us from the inside out. It is a life where love is lived out and given away.

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