

July 12, 2015



“Blessed, Broken and Poured Out”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

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 towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

This passage we just heard begins the Letter to the Ephesians with this rich and dense theological rant. These 12 verses are in fact one long run on sentence in the original Greek. I like this because I sometimes have a tendency to use run on sentences myself, but it also feels as though the writer is so overwhelmed with the amazing, abundant, overflowing goodness that is our God, that they cannot help themselves from rambling on and on and on, painting this holy and amazing picture of the Divine.

The writer piles one superlative upon another, one blessing upon another, just to nail down their point about the very character and nature of God.

It is:

God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing

God who chooses us in Christ

God who adopted us as God's children according to the pleasure of God's good will

It is God whose glorious grace is freely bestowed on us

It is God in whom we have redemption and forgiveness according to the riches of his grace that God lavished on us...

And the writer goes on and on and on.

I like to believe that when someone writes something, that it is intentional, that there is a meaning that underlies each of these texts, that the writer has a purpose for this passage. So it begs the question why would the writer of Ephesians start their letter in this way, what need were they trying to address? Why begin with this long run on sentence that emphasizes again and again and again that God lavishes us with grace?

The Letter to the Ephesians is kind of a strange letter in the New Testament for a couple reasons. First, although it is sometimes attributed to the Apostle Paul there is pretty strong consensus from modern biblical scholars that it was most likely written by one of Paul's friends or companions and not by Paul himself. There is also some strong agreement among the scholarly community that this letter was not actually written to the church in Ephesus because, well, there is nothing in the letter itself that actually addresses a particular situation or any particular problems which would anchor it in one Christian community.

So the theory that I like to believe is that this was a letter written by a follower of Jesus who was taught by the Apostle Paul, who penned this letter to serve as a circuit letter. The writer intentionally circulated this letter among the early churches around the known world. It would serve as an open letter to the early Christian Church.

Know you might be thinking to yourself, Robert, that is very interesting and well and good, but what does that actually mean for us today and how does that actually influence how we see this passage?

It is important for this reason. We are telling ourselves a story. You are telling yourself a story.

As individuals and as a community we are telling ourselves a story about who we are. Some of this story bubbles up from within, from our own experience, from our conflicts and our triumphs, from our insecurities to our strengths.

Some of it comes from the external, how others perceive us, from our families, from our cultural or ethnic identities, from those who have worldly power and clout, from advertisers trying to sell us an identity.

And as people and communities we internalize all of this and it becomes part of the story of our life and our life together, and in that way we are no different than any human person who has ever lived or will ever live because stories shape our identities.

So maybe, just maybe, the writer of this passage is so over the top in this sentence because the early Christians found it just as hard to believe the Gospel, the Good News, this the Greatest Story ever told, as we sometimes do.

Maybe the writer was penning this passage with all of their friends in mind

who struggle with doubt in themselves and God, who struggle with shame, people who have felt abandoned and alone and forgotten and of little worth.

It is always helpful to remember that the early church was not made up of the powerful and the elite, but it was a movement of fishermen, women, children and slaves.

They followed this no-named itinerant, which is a fancy way of saying homeless preacher, who invited people into a new living vision of the kingdom of God where the last were the first and the poor were blessed and the meek will inherit the earth.

It was a movement who insisted that the creator, the awesome and most holy and sacred divine spirit that called all things into being was embodied in this rabbi who took on everything that we could ever experience, the joys and sorrows of this life that we might have a share of God's infinite and abundant life here and now.

This story still seems unbelievable to many of us today. That God can lavish us with grace, can bestow upon us every spiritual blessing, that God reaches out to us in our loneliness and isolation and adopts us as God's own.

So take a moment and think about the story that you are telling yourself?

Are you feeling like you are in this on your own, maybe at work or at home with your kids, like you just don't have a partner, and the world is on your shoulders?

Are you feeling like your just not as good as you used to be, like your stuck, longing for those days when things were easier and came more naturally, when you had more energy or you felt more alert and attentive, and you think if only I could be like I was my life would be perfect.

Are you holding onto something that you said or did or felt or thought, a moment of weakness or temptation that you gave into that is still defining you and has a hold on your life? Do you feel ashamed, un-loveable, unforgivable?

Do you sometimes look at your life and think, who am I to deserve all of this?

What the writer here in Ephesians says to us is this:

It is God's good pleasure to lavish you and all creation with grace and love.

There is something at work which underlies everything in this universe, that gives life and movement and shape to this whole she-bang and that thing is Christ, the Christos- not just Jesus of Nazareth the carpenter and rabbi who told amazing stories and called disciples and healed people, but the Christos, the sacred life-giving love of God made flesh in the fullness of time. The Christos which was the word that was spoken at the beginning of all creation and ordered chaos and brought forth life. The Christos, the real, nitty gritty, dirty and bloody life giving love of God that is God's self-revelation in this man Jesus who took everything that we can or will ever experience onto himself, even alienation and separation from God - so this entire creation might be reconciled, healed and made whole. This is what it means to be blessed with every spiritual blessing.

At the end of our reading the writer implores their listeners to participate in this life, to practice this life, to make this story, God's story, their story. We get to experience that today as we prepare to commission our Youth Service Project Team in just a little bit. These 19 youth and 6 adults are a really, really good part of our community's story. They have been blessed with every spiritual blessing. God is lavishing them with love and with grace and the only appropriate response is gratitude and generosity, sharing of themselves, giving a little of their own life away for the sake of this story, for the sake of this good news.

Here's the thing about being blessed- in order to be blessed by someone, that person has to give part of themselves away. Jesus captures this at the last meal with his disciples when he says, this is my body and blood given for you, give life away for others as I have done this for you.

To put it another way- in order to be inspired, which literally means to breathe in the spirit, in spiritus, someone else has to breathe out.

So take a look at our team, breath in, feel inspired and know that they will be giving of themselves, their sweat, their energy, their focus, their time, for the sake of sharing this good news, to participate in God's good work of lavishing this world with grace and bestowing upon us all every spiritual blessing.

All thanks, all honor and all glory belongs to God. Amen.

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