

Sermon, January 2, 2022

Ephesians 1:3-14

“Our Inheritance”

The passage from Ephesians that I just read, in the original Greek is actually one very long sentence, that lays out a cosmic vision of God’s plan for the whole of Creation. It places the Christ at the very center of it all. The Christ should be understood as synonymous with the Word, or Logos, which became incarnate in the person named Jesus of Nazareth. The Word is the creative and transformative dimension of God. In that sense, it should be understood that Jesus is the Christ, but the Christ is more than Jesus.

The reading begins with the assertion that in the Christ, i.e., the Word, we became God’s children by adoption through Jesus Christ. From this John Calvin derived the concept of predestination or election, meaning that from the beginning of Creation God chose those who would be saved and who would not. This, for example, became an essential doctrine in Puritan society. Although it was unknown who was and who was not among the elect, Puritan men and women, strove to live lives that revealed they were among the chosen. Although this was a part of our Congregational heritage, it is a problematic idea for today. More on that later.

The passage goes on to tell us that we are redeemed through the blood of Jesus, meaning that we are forgiven our sins, making us blameless in the eyes of God. We commemorate this in our participation in the Lord’s Supper this morning. But as Paul states this all takes place on the basis of God’s grace. In other words, there is nothing we can do to earn it. It is the free gift of God out of the great depths of his love. We can only accept it on the basis of faith.

In verse 10 Paul speaks of “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” It is here that I depart from Calvin, and the idea of predestination or election, but that in the fullness of time the breadth of God’s grace and love is revealed.

In a recent sermon, and a newsletter article, I spoke of the need for greater dialogue between the great religions of the world, not only for better relations, but that although he is called by many names, we all share the one and only God. As the recently deceased Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, stated, God is not a Christian...nor is he a Jew, a Muslim, or Hindu. God is God, and we are all his children.

He goes on to say, “Love is universal. You don’t have to tell somebody that loving is better than hating. You don’t have to believe in God to know that stealing is bad. All of God’s children and their different faiths helps to realize the immensity of God. No faith contains the whole truth about God. And certainly, Christians don’t have a corner on God. All of us belong to God.”

I know there are those in the Christian world who will have a big problem with this, but it does not denigrate or lessen the importance of Jesus Christ in our lives. We all choose our own pathways to God, and for those of us who call ourselves Christian we recognize that God and his love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

There are those who believe that there is only one way to salvation, while others believe in different pathways. A former professor of mine, named Mark Heim, wrote a book entitled, "Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion", which puts forth the idea that there are different forms of salvation. For example, Christian salvation has to do with forgiveness of sin, and a rebirth into New Life, Jewish salvation has to do with liberation, such as their liberation from Egypt, and for Buddhist's salvation comes in the form of enlightenment and the end of suffering.

A few years ago, a group of us read a book together by Barbara Brown Taylor called, "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others". In it she points out that contrary to popular opinion, all religions are *not* alike. "Their understandings of the human condition proceed from different assumptions, leading them to propose different remedies." But, of course, there are many similarities, such as the Golden Rule, which is found in some form in all of the world's great religions, and Barbara Brown goes on to say that an understanding and appreciation of other religions can, in fact, deepen and strengthen our own faith.

I am a Christian. Always have been, always will be. I place my faith in God in and through Jesus Christ, and try my best to follow in his footprints, yet I truly appreciate Tutu's recognition of the "immensity of God" and choose to call people of all godly faiths my brother and sister. Amen.

**Let us pray:** God, most kind and loving, we thank you for this day and all the blessings you bestow. We thank for the gift of your Son Jesus as well as the presence of your Holy Spirit. Bless your church both here and abroad. Lead us, that we might live our lives in ways that are pleasing to you.

The last two years have been difficult Lord, and we thank you for seeing us through. We pray that this new year will be better but acknowledge that no matter what might be, you will be with us, leading and sustaining us. Give to us a vision for our future, as well as the faith and courage to bring that vision to reality.

As always, Lord, we pray for those in need of your healing presence, and for those facing difficulties of all sorts.

Barbara, the Fielding's daughter, Lisa, lupus and covid - and her child, who also has covid.