

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein. Amen.*

In reviewing the lessons for this morning, I was delighted to discover that we are beginning to work our way through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. As we will discover in the coming weeks, the Book of Common Prayer makes generous use of many of the verses in Ephesians, incorporating them into our baptismal rite, in our offertory sentences and in our blessings. Indeed, this letter is deeply rooted in Pauline theology, and after Romans, can be said to have had great influence on Christian thought and spirituality. (footnote 1)

Although only six chapters long, it is "thick" with meaning. Yet it is unlike other letters clearly attributable to Paul. As we only have Paul's part of the conversation, we have learned to look for particular problems in a particular place that Paul is trying to resolve. In Paul's undisputed letters, in addition to addressing pressing issues, we see him wrestle with what Christ's life, death and resurrection mean as well as what the implications are when Christ's "second coming" is clearly no longer immanent. We don't see any of this in Ephesians. It has a jubilant and hopeful tone – there appears to be no worries about the establishment of the church and a vision of a unified church, containing both Jew and gentile. The

distinctions have been erased by Christ, who has broken down the wall of hostility between the two groups. So this letter is all about what God has done for us, rejoices in all God has done for us and schools us in how we ought to respond to this gift that God has so freely given.

These opening verses of the Epistle may well have come from an ancient hymn of praise and it proclaims that Christ is the source of our salvation and that the initiative for that salvation is all God's. It anticipates that all of humankind is united and that humankind's response is full-throated praise of God. As we Christians now know God's ultimate plan through Christ's life, death and resurrection, we have confidence that God's plan will be fully realized even as we understand that God's plan is only partly revealed in the here and now. You may be wondering, however, are we just deluding ourselves, and the answer is "no!" because the Holy Spirit is present among us. She is present when we gather to worship, praising God and confessing Christ as our Lord. So many of us can attest to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, those hair-raising, delightful moments when we know something greater than ourselves is at work. Paul is telling us that God has blessed us, that he has chosen us, and that he has destined us for saving embrace. And we are extravagantly loved by God.

This is supposed to be good news. News that causes us to rejoice and give thanks. News that motivates us to be the hands and feet of Christ. At the same time, it is news that is hard to take in.

Hard because sometimes we feel and even know that we can behave in unlovable ways, both individually and corporately. It's hard because even things out of our control can cause us shame or make us feel violated and unlovable. It's hard because in this parish with the mighty heart for social justice and meeting the needs of the impoverished, our community feels like it isn't making any headway, we have to tread water just to stay in one place, participating in our ministries feel like work and a burden, and coming to worship feels like an obligation. Even acknowledging and in saying these things out loud can make us feel guilty and a failure.

It's hard because sometimes actions that seemed right at the time, upon reflection cause us shame now. Many in South Carolina, proud of their heritage are dismayed that the symbol of that heritage has also been used as a symbol of hate and so are willing to see that revered symbol removed from the State House. And in the blogisphere, print media and other venues we debate the appropriateness of a variety of Confederate

symbols in public places. If it is hurtful to some, but not all – what is the appropriate action? And there are multiple viewpoints in responding to this question. Divisions continue to abound even a 150 years after the conclusion of the Civil War. So whether it is an issue that affects us directly here at Ascension, or an issue as a state or nation, where is the unity envisioned by Paul to the Ephesians? How do we rejoice in all that God has given us? How do we respond when very little seems to change and all our energy is sapped with the effort of trying?

Allow me to suggest that our focus may be in the wrong place. If, as we look in the mirror, our focus is on our efforts, our abilities, and on our actions, then our focus is in the wrong place. Looking inward will make it easy to find fault, to find us lacking, to find us flawed. Rather let us lift our eyes up: to where we gather at the altar, and up to the cross and let God be our mirror instead. Let's keep reminding ourselves that God has blessed US, that God has chosen US, and that we are His beloved. Let us bask in that. Let remember that God has pronounced us good and has made us His through Christ. And to help us remember, let's recover our joy and our sense of fun. Let's just spend some time enjoying one other, resting and

re-creating with and for each other. Let's stimulate each other by wrestling with God's word and/or engaging in fulfilling spiritual practices.

As we live into this, let us take the time to notice the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives and within this parish community. Let us notice the abundant blessings we have and the glorious grace we have been given. Notice that while portions of our lives might be impoverished like Cinderella, like her we all have tickets to the ball, we have all been invited to share in the riches of God's grace. Let those riches feed us and empower us. Let our mighty heart become brave enough to risk failure in the world's terms, because God is fully in charge of the outcome as we saw in last week's Gospel message as Jesus sent the disciples out into the mission field. We can be mindful that following God's way is a path of suffering within the strictly human realm, as the detailed story about John the Baptist reminds us. Yet if our gaze is focused using God as our lens, we know that in the end, it will turn out all right, just as God has planned. And the next time we sing hymn 436, let's sing the fourth verse with joy and passion: Redeemer come! I open wide my heart to thee; here lord, abide! Let me thy inner presence feel: thy grace and love in me reveal."

Let this verse reverberate with us as we watch, wait and see what marvelous things the Spirit manifests in us.

AMEN.

Brown, Raymond E., *An Introduction To The New Testament*, (Yale University Press: New Haven and London) 1997, p 620.

Paul J. Achtemeir, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2009, 233.