

This month we're taking a break from Mark and a detour into the epistle, or letter, to the Ephesians. Last week I began our journey with the first 14 verses of chapter one, which include a greeting and blessings as these kinds of letters usually do, in verses 1 and 2. The rest of the passage, the whole of chapter one, really, is kind of a thesis statement for the rest of the letter—that the Ephesians were a part of something huge, that they were chosen, blessed, destined, redeemed, forgiven, and lavished with grace. Indeed, the believers at Ephesus have been given a great gift, an inheritance that God had planned for since before time began—not unlike the way many of us plan for the future of our own children if we can—a cosmic picture of God's plan. As children of God, both those who believed first and those who believed later, they are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit—most likely, as I said last week, through baptism.

Today we move into the second chapter of this epistle, skipping over the first 10 verses and beginning with verse 11. As with Mark's gospel, the lectionary leaves out parts of the book that its curators determined were not as important theologically. Verses 1-10 are important, though, because they give us context and prepare the reader for verses 11-22. Listen to these first 10 verses of chapter 2:

*You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

Again we have this cosmic theme that we saw in chapter 1. The writer reminds the churches who heard the letter that they used to be no better than anyone living in the world because they followed the “disobedient spirit.” The people once lived among the disobedient spirits and were subject to God's judgment, just like everyone else outside of the church. However, God being God, acted in kindness and love to create a way out of the influence of those disobedient spirits who had held humanity in thrall; by grace through faith in Christ grace was given to humanity who was then lifted up “into the heavenly places” with Christ. God did this for no other reason than love; not because we asked God to, or because we did what God wanted, but because God loves us that much.

Now, let's unpack this a little bit. The writer talks about us being *saved*, which is a word and a concept that gets thrown around a lot. Most of us have grown up with the idea of being *saved from our sins* which to me is a pretty vague idea to build a theology around! Saved from what and to what? Growing up in the South it was “saved from Hell and saved to Heaven; here, I think, the salvation is from the *disobedient spirits* that cause all kinds of trouble in the world and are (cosmically speaking) responsible for the brokenness of the world. When we live among the disobedient spirits we tend to live for *ourselves*; which can involve all kinds of behaviors but the important thing is that living for ourselves separates us from each other. Through grace we are removed from this realm (again, cosmically speaking) into a cleaner, more pure environment (I mean, what could be purer than being with Christ in the heavenly realm???) Not so much a “get out of hell free” card, but so that we might do God's work in the world—work of reconciliation and redemption.

And there it is—the specter of “works righteousness.” Don’t worry, that’s not what this means. But it is a good tie in to our passage for today!

*So then*, says the writer...and you know something meaningful is coming. We have A,B,C, and D, so *then*... God chose, blessed, forgave, redeemed; there is an inheritance, a mark of the Holy Spirit, an inheritance; there is grace, freely and lovingly given to humanity by God to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives.

So then...

Once upon a time Gentiles were without Christ, just as Jews were once without Christ—and Jews and Gentiles were divided. And this wasn’t your ordinary snubbery—I pass you on the street without greeting you—this was complete animosity and distaste; they would not touch each other nor eat with each other at the same table. That’s one of the things that got Jesus in trouble, remember? That he ate with sinners and tax collectors? Who were undoubtedly Gentiles? But in Jesus Christ the two groups are made one. And they are together in unity, not uniformity; not one group dominant, forcing it’s ideas and beliefs and practices onto the other. I like to think of it kind of like being under an umbrella: those under the umbrella stay different people, but they have to move together if they are both going to stay dry. There is a unity of purpose that can be attained without either person giving in to the other’s forcible direction. Of course as with all metaphors, it is incomplete—there isn’t anything quite like being in community with people who you wouldn’t eat with or shake hands with.

Imagine the shock of those outside of the early church knowing and perhaps seeing who was sitting down to eat together!

In a practical sense, if we believe this epistle belongs to us too and applies to us today, what can we take from it? It may be hard for us to imagine a situation in which we were without God in the world; most of us here have been raised in the church and most of us have not felt like “aliens” who were saved or rescued from disobedient spirits by Christ. Although, just growing up in the church or being a part of the church for a long time doesn’t mean you’ve never felt disconnected from or disenfranchised by the church. Even the church, with all of its cosmic lifting up and gifting of grace isn’t perfect and has managed to reject many people and has become irrelevant in the lives of many others. It is a sign of the incompleteness of God’s kingdom that we are still broken, we are still trying to figure out what it means to live under grace and how the world might be changed if we all managed to figure it out and live into that understanding. So then...

Let us remember those times when we felt rejected by church, when we felt ourselves to be the outsider. And let’s think about those people who we are repelled by, who we are disgusted by, who we would be ashamed or afraid to sit next to on the bus or in the doctor’s office or in the church pew. Where are the walls that we put up to keep us safe and secure in our own tribe? What are the walls? Could they be walls of prosperity? Walls of color? Walls of “churchiness” or “truthiness?” Could they be political walls? Could the walls of the church building not only serve to give us a place to worship in- but also a place that keeps people out? Maybe not through locked doors or unfriendliness—because you all are the friendliest bunch I know!—but by being intimidating to someone who has never been to church before; by being irrelevant to someone who values hands on mission work over one more chore on their already endless chores list; by our expectation that we have something great! but that they have to come *to us* to get it—an expectation born in another time, an expectation that was once valid but just isn’t anymore. For whatever reason. To whatever purpose.

The good news—and in Christ, there’s *always* good news—is that God has broken down all of the walls between us, through Christ Jesus. And God is waiting for us to take this good news to the world,

a world that is broken, but not beyond repair. We have received all of the good things of God through our faith in Christ, so *then* we must share our story with our community and the world—even and maybe especially the most unpleasant parts of it.

I want to close with a quote from a pastor friend of mine who leads a new worshipping community in Long Island. After their latest gathering, she wrote:

*I am not the first person to think many of the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith are a little loony. I mean, regular bread and wine that somehow becomes infused with Jesus or perhaps for some Christians actually becomes the body and blood of Jesus? What the what? Yeah. It sounds completely crazy, like maybe some parent made up the story of the bread and wine to get her kid to eat his dinner. And yet, if you've ever sat at the Table with friends, family, even strangers and found yourself being fed not just by the food but by the love and laughter enveloping you, if you've ever been hungry and thirsty maybe not physically but emotionally and spiritually and had someone hold out her hand to you and offer you a drink or a slice of warm bread, if you've ever been the stranger, the one on the outside and someone pulled out a chair from the table and bid you to come sit and eat, well then you know story about Jesus and God and bread and wine and the Table is not so crazy or unbelievable. You know God is somehow present in that bread and in that wine and in the love of those gathered at the Table with you. Let's do this as much as we possibly can.*

This is what I want. This is what I want for you. This is what I believe God wants for all of us. To the glory of God and in the peace of Christ. Amen.