

Sunday July 11, 2021 – Sermon – Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Ephesians 1:3-14

Identity, Purpose, and Promise.

There are many passages in Ephesians that I love, and our first reading this morning is one of them. One of the many things I love about Ephesians is that it oozes praise and gratitude.

This letter to the church in Ephesus, that we usually refer to as the book of Ephesians (because it's a book in the Bible), is thought to be a general letter written to provide a message for the whole church. This is a bit different from the apostle Paul's other letters which tend to deal with specific issues or concerns.

But even though this letter written to the church in Ephesus summarizes key aspects of Paul's thought, some scholars have noted some important differences in the content and writing style of Ephesians when compared with other letters whose authorship by Paul is undisputed.

So this letter may not actually be written by Paul, but by a disciple of Paul. When this letter was written, about 2,000 years ago, it was common practice for a disciple of a famous teacher to write a letter in the name of the teacher, so it is not a surprise or concern that this letter may not have been written by Paul. We don't pick up on the differences in content and writing style as readily in English translations of the Bible, but when looking at the earliest manuscripts that were written in Greek, translators have picked up some notable differences such as some sentences are unusually long.

This passage from v. 3-14 is actually one long sentence in the Greek. Another difference is that there are nearly 90 words that appear in this letter that do not appear in any other writings of Paul's.

But regardless of whether this letter was written by Paul or not, it still contains words of wisdom, comfort and hope for Christians today.

This passage speaks about identity, purpose, and promise.

Identity

We hear about our identity in this passage that *“God had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of God’s love, to be made whole and holy by God’s love. Long, long ago God decided to adopt us into God’s family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure God took in planning this!) God wanted us to enter into the celebration of God’s lavish gift-giving by the hand of Jesus Christ.”*

It is exactly this gift that we acknowledge and celebrate through baptism. How wonderful that Indy was baptized today to serve as a living example of this. Today we formally welcomed Indy into the body of Christ and into our church family here at Christ Lutheran. God’s adoption of her is celebrated by the community of faith.

Just as Lucas and Cassie are living the reality of Indy being the focus of their love, most parents can relate to how their children are the focus of their love. And even if we aren’t parents, hopefully many of us as children can understand what it is to be the focus of a parent’s love.

The image of adoption is a powerful image because we know in the cases of adoption that the parents have made a conscious decision to adopt a child as their very own.

As it is with God and us. We are the focus of God’s abundant and lavish love through this relationship that God began with us because God has chosen us. Unlike what the world tells us, our identity is not based on what we do or accomplish, or how successful we are. Our identity is based on **whose we are**, beloved children of God.

Purpose

We also hear about our purpose in this passage from Ephesians that *“It’s in Christ we find out who we are and what we are living for... God had an eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living.”*

This glorious living doesn't mean that we won't experience difficulties in our lives, or illness, or broken relationships. This glorious living is about knowing and believing that God is always with us and God is always at work in our lives and that God has been, is, and will be at work in all the joys and sorrows of our lives.

Because God is with us, we can live with purpose, confidence, and hope. As we heard at Indy's baptism today, and was said when we were baptized, "Let the light of Christ, which God has placed in our hearts, shine through our words and actions from this day forward." God's desire for us, God's purpose for us is that we let our lights shine before others that our words and actions may glorify God.

Promise

In Ephesians we also hear, *"It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it..., found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit."*

When I read this verse, I just had to listen to the song by Stevie Wonder titled *"Signed, Sealed, and Delivered"* and I couldn't help but think that it makes a great love song sung by us to God!

What exactly does it mean to be sealed with the Holy Spirit?

A seal is an identifying mark often placed on a letter, contract, or another document. For example, there are seals of authenticity on my post secondary degrees of the educational institutions they are from. There are also seals of the ELCIC Saskatchewan Synod on my ordination document and my letters of call to this congregation.

A seal can also show that what was in a letter came from the person whose seal was on the outside. Historically wax seals were used and are also now coming back into fashion.

In the ancient world, cattle and even slaves were branded with a seal to show whom they belonged. This mark would discourage people from stealing them because they had the seal upon them.

The Bible refers to seals in a few different ways, which can help us understand what the reference to a seal means in Ephesians. In the Old Testament, God set a sign on God's chosen ones to mark them out or set them apart as God's and to keep them from destruction (Ezek. 9:4–6). We read in Revelation (7:3) that God places a seal on his people to identify them and protect them.

We also see that the guards put a large stone over the tomb of Jesus to seal it (Matt. 27:66) and of John being told to seal up the words of the prophecy (Rev. 22:10). This communicates security. We see that in the Scriptures a seal communicates ownership, protection, security, and a validation of the relationship. The seal in Ephesians 1 is a “who,” not a “what,” as we hear that we are “*signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit.*”

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

The Holy Spirit is our seal. This assures us that God's own Spirit lives in us. The Holy Spirit provides the inward assurance that we are God's children.¹

Knowing that a seal communicates ownership, protection, security, and a validation of the relationship, being sealed by the Holy Spirit assures us that we are God's precious children who God loves, forgives and is always with.

As people of faith, we have been richly blessed by God. We have been given so much and have so much to be thankful for. We live in the assurance of our identity as God's beloved children. We live with purpose as we live in response to God's abundant blessings in our lives. We live in the security of the promise that God loves us, forgives us, and will always be with us.

As far as I'm concerned, there is no other response to that, except the words of Stevie Wonder: *God, Signed, sealed, and delivered, I'm yours!* Amen.

Written by Pastor Lynn Robertson

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/mean-sealed-holy-spirit/>