

“Living Into Our Inheritance”

July 11, 2021

Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-14

What do you imagine when you think about God? What images come to mind? A lot of us have been trained, or conditioned really, to picture God standing in judgment of us, frowning down on us when we fail to do the right thing, even when we're not always sure what the right thing is. God hovers over us just waiting for us to make a mistake. The famous colonial preacher Jonathan Edwards titled his best known sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” He describes us as insects being held by God over the flames. That image has burrowed into our psyches, replacing for many of us the Bible's God with this Puritan fabrication.

And I really do believe it's a lie. I find nothing in the Bible that leads me to believe that God delights in punishing us. I find nothing in the Bible to suggest God is lying in wait for a reason to condemn us. Yet that assumption has a home in many of our hearts and without our fully realizing it, it shapes our actions and our responses in the world. It seems to me, whoever wrote this letter to the Ephesians, probably not Paul but a student of his, but whoever it was understood our tendency to believe the worst about ourselves and project those qualities onto God.

The writer seems desperate to communicate a new vision to them. If you read this portion of the letter in Greek, you'll find it has virtually no punctuation, at least none that would end a sentence. It's all one long run-on sentence. The writer is breathless to convince them they are worthy of God's love. He even goes so far as to say they're predestined, a word we Presbyterians love to hate, for adoption. That word may raise some red flags with you but really it's not about life being predetermined, as if everything that happens to us is part of God's puppet show. Unfortunately, that's how a lot of people think about it. Predestination is about our identity as God's own. It says our ultimate destination is in God; it's a given, and there's nothing we can do to change that.

And that's what this writer wants these Christians to understand. They are God's own and have been from the very start. They're told they have an inheritance revealed through Christ. In fact, Christ is our inheritance. Christ reveals who we really are: sons and daughters of God. An inheritance can be thought of in a couple of ways. Most of us think about it as a material thing like money or property. But we inherit other things, too. We inherit certain features or characteristics, maybe even proclivities. There are intangibles in our lives that we never chose but are inherent in us by virtue of being born.

It's that aspect of inheritance that I think this writer is talking about. Through Christ, God reveals to us our inner nature, our inherited essence. And we all have a share in it. It's not something we've earned or won; it's our birthright. We are daughters and sons of God, just as Christ is, regardless of anything we've done or failed to do. Our challenge is living into that reality, living into our inheritance.

The Christians in this church are in danger of capitulating to the delusion that there is some kind of natural hierarchy of value among humans. Whenever we create these artificial differences between us, based on skin color or gender or sexual identity or religion or wealth, whenever we identify ourselves or others as anything but a child of God, we fail to live into our inheritance. We fail to find our true selves in Christ.

This is what the writer means when she writes, “With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of Divine will, according to God’s good pleasure set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ.” Christ is the essence of God revealed in the flesh. All things, all people, all species, all elements share in that essence. Our identity is more than what we see or disclose of ourselves. Our true identity, our deepest selves are revealed through Christ.

Now, that’s not true because of Christ, as if before Christ we had no share in God. Christ reveals what has always been true of us. Jesus calls us to see ourselves clearly, to see past our delusions of division. He calls us to see that we are God’s own, that God’s grace is lavished on us. And when we ignore that call, we’re diminished in too many ways to count. When we choose to be mired in self-delusion, we become destructive not only to those around us, including the creation we all share, but also to ourselves. Even though we think we’re preserving or protecting something, in fact all we’re doing is driving a wider and wider wedge between ourselves and God.

The writer of Ephesians is offering a different way. He’s offering a way of living that dispenses with the delusions and invites us to embrace the love God offers in Christ. The choice is pretty clear: we can go on trying to maintain our divisions, go on with this exhausting, pointless exercise in futility that feeds our egos but starves our souls. Or we can find hope in God’s love revealed through Christ, we can find life beyond ourselves that’s whole and lasting by forming relationships with those around us we’ve always been taught to despise or fear. We can put an end to the exhaustion of propping up an image of ourselves and see the image of Christ all around us.

When we give into that hope, when we begin living into our inheritance, we will finally see the world as it truly is. We’ll finally understand what Jesus was saying all along, what God has revealed through Christ, that all things are one and we are one with God.

Amen