

Sermon: Ephesians 1:1-14

The Epistle to the Ephesians is one of the letters often attributed to the Apostle Paul written to the churches that he founded on his various missionary journeys. The earliest copies that we have of this letter do not actually name to which church it was addressed, as though, perhaps, the reader would just fill in the name of the church where it was being read at the time.

But in any case, whether it was specifically meant for the church at Ephesus or not, most of Paul's writings were intended to be circulated and read in all of the churches anyway. And that is, I think, the best way for us to hear it as the letter arrives at our church this morning.

The message of Ephesians, we must remember, was not addressed to any individual person but rather to a group of people, more specifically, to a church. And I would propose that we might today hear what it has to say not just to you or me as individual Christians, but rather what it has to say to US together, as a church, maybe even what it has to say to this church.

You know, the best way to approach scripture is always to read it in light of what the whole book or letter has to say. Otherwise, we might miss the real meaning in context or worse still, we might find ourselves just cherry-picking verses to find the ones that tell us just what we want to hear and nothing else.

In the case of a book like Ephesians that's fairly easy to do as it is only six chapters long so we can quickly read the whole letter to see what the overall message is so that we can understand everything it says in light of that larger message.

And the overall message of Ephesians, I think, has to do with the purpose and calling of the Church and that purpose and that calling, according to Ephesians at least, is to bring unity- to be a witness to the love of Christ, first between each other, between us, within the church, and then for all of God's children in the world around us.

The early church, like anything new, had its share of struggles- growing pains, you might call it. The initial followers of Christ, like the disciples, were mostly Jewish. They did not see themselves as “former Jews” when they became followers of Christ.

They saw themselves as still “fully Jewish” and they believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah prophesied throughout their “fully Jewish” history. They mostly continued to observe in their traditional rituals and practices even as they interpreted them now anew in light of the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But as the church grew, and perhaps especially in the churches that Paul established, more and more non-Jews, gentiles, became followers of Christ as well and became a part of the church, and this created “challenges”.

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, (the people of Israel, the children of Abraham) they had always seen themselves as a special people chosen by God, the One true God, in a unique way. They were set aside, blessed and given a special promise and they saw everyone else, as well...not one of us, and in some way, the other.

And in return, the non-Jews, the Gentiles saw the Jews as different, standoffish, perhaps even odd and backward. There was a long-held separation and distrust between gentiles and Jews, and this naturally led to, shall we say, “trust issues” in the church.

And so, Paul addresses the church with a message of love and unity that might be summed up in just two words, words that every parent of more than one child has no doubt repeated often. Get along! He implores them. Please, just get along.

But in this case, it is not just in order to keep peace in the family or to have a more pleasant ride to grandma’s house but because the church has a holy calling and a divine witness in the world- a calling to be and to share the love and grace and peace of Christ to all God’s children and to show the world what Christ’s love looks like lived out, love in the flesh.

Paul begins by reminding them, both Jew and Gentile, that God is the one who did the choosing. And God chose them, all of them, Gentile and Jew, even before the creation of the world.

Eugene Peterson in The Message translation put it this way, “Long before God laid down earth’s foundation, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love”.

I love that Paul uses the metaphor of adoption to describe our relationship with God and with each other. In love, Paul says, God predestined us, chose us, for adoption. God chooses us and adopts us, you see and becomes our “forever parent”, as they say in adoption circles, and all God’s children therefore, become our “forever family”.

I know something about adoption. My wife and I have six children and our two youngest are adopted. And I can tell you, as I’m sure any of you here who have adopted children can testify as well, although we did not give birth to them, they are fully and completely our children, and we love them with all we have.

But you know, the thing that truly does my old heart good is the fact that they all love each other too. They are spread out in age from 42 to 17. Among them are full siblings, and half siblings, and step siblings and adopted siblings. Any way you can have a sibling, we have it in our family. But they all consider each other to be brothers and sisters and they love each other as family.

Yes, it does my old heart good to see it and I think it surely does God’s heart good to see us love each other as family, as brothers and sisters, too and I am fairly certain as well, that it just breaks God’s heart when we don’t.

When we hear Paul speak of God choosing us and adopting us it tells us something about our relationship to God. But perhaps just as importantly, you see, it tells us something about our relationship to each other, for we are adopted into a family, a family of God’s own choosing and that means we have brothers and sisters- lots of them.

I live and attend church in Hickory, and it seems that our church and this church are in a similar situation right now. Our senior pastor has announced that he will be retiring soon, and we are already beginning the process to find and call a new pastor as I understand you have too.

A change in pastoral leadership can be a difficult and vulnerable time for a church and I will freely admit that the last time our church was in this process, it did not go well. Emotions were high, opinions strongly held. Divisions were revealed.

But I hope and I pray that we are all united in our desire and commitment to do better this time and that we will, as my mother charged me the day I went off to college, remember who we are. Remember who we are- children of God, sisters and brothers in a God chosen family.

It is the call of the church in Ephesus and of this church and my church and every other church to be a living witness to the love that Christ has for us all by first loving one another as Christ loved us.

But the challenges that existed within the Ephesian church were (as always it seems) largely a reflection of the realities in the world around them. They were surrounded by social divisions and tribalism, conflict and violence, abject poverty in the midst of opulent wealth, superpowers, and wars.

Yes, the world of the fledgling church at Ephesus was regrettably, not unlike our own and the call to that ancient church is not unlike the call to the church of our day as well- to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth, Paul says, unity my friends to the whole big old world.

Now how you actually do that, I haven't a clue. But I think we can surely all agree that the world is in an awful big need of healing, and *somebody* needs to step forward and do *something* and it still seems a reasonable though uncomfortably convicting question to ask, "If not us, then who?"

And maybe it's not ours to try to heal the whole world but just the piece of the world within our own reach. And maybe it doesn't require some great big thing, but the persistent accumulation of enough great little things just might do more good than we can now know.

Maybe a good place to start is to remember our own adoption and their adoption too. So that we will remember and so that we will know that even with folks out there, we are ALL one family for they are God's children too.

Now that doesn't mean that we have to agree on everything, and it most certainly doesn't mean that we deny our own deeply held values and principles. But it might help if we could speak our own truth with much kindness and much patience and much love and deeply listen to the truth as others see it with even more. At least that sounds like a good place to start to me.

The letter to the Ephesians was written to a divided church in a troubled world and it called them to bring unity and healing and love to both. And although it has been nearly 2000 years now since that letter was first sent, it would remain just as pertinent to the church in our time if it were to arrive in our own mailbox today.

Yes, the church of Christ has always had a sacred call and a divine purpose and by that, so does every Christian in it. May we hear and we heed that call, and may we claim our divine purpose, to be the living embodiment of Christ's healing love for all God's children wherever we may find them.