

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Sunday Observance of Epiphany
January 5, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 72:1-16

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Ephesians 3:1-12 NRSV

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Boundless Riches

The Letter to the Ephesians is one of those books of the *Bible* that people love or hate, love to hate, or love and hate at the same time. One of the many unique factors about the letter is its language and **style of writing**. Scholars believe that this is not the direct writing of Paul, but of someone in the early church who had extensive knowledge of Paul and his writings. The tone is one of **authority**: someone who makes many points just as Paul would do, using various means of persuasion through words and images. But, as we read it, we find that the congregations are **more established** than during Paul’s time; and, that there is a sense of understanding of what is practical and conventional and what is not. That is where we get the detailed instruction on **appearances and behaviors** for those within the congregations (*Ephesians* 4-5). Our modern readers in the church and outside the faith see these lists of instructions and begin to despise the entire letter. This is because a lot of those instructions run counter to current understandings of our **culture** and what is acceptable and decent in society.

For example, women and men no longer wear hats to worship today, unlike the 1950's and early 1960's, which is something unheard of in my childhood. Today, most of us want to keep up **appearances**, especially with our hair, or the lack of it, in my case. Likewise, the more wealthy women in the early church, like their friends and peers outside the church who were pagans, spent a lot of time and energy on their hair and its appearance. Likely they were using elaborate and **decorative styles** that were not easy to take down. This worked just fine at the celebrations and gatherings of the elite, especially if they were part of wealthy or influential families. But, when they dressed so ornately while attending a gathering of the congregation, most of whom were peasants and quite poor, it made them **stand out** a bit too much. So, the writer of *Ephesians* spent considerable time addressing issues like these that now seem offensive to an awful lot of people. And, we have not approached more controversial views, such as those on **slavery**. We will save that for another time, certainly.

As we have mentioned before, the writer of *Ephesians* seems to have **authority** that Paul did not possess when he wrote the majority of his, shall we say, **authentic** letters. In them, such as *Galatians* and the *Letters to the Corinthians*, Paul tried hard to put aside controversies, settling disputes and setting examples consistent with his message. But, throughout his writings in these particular Epistles, he placed himself **alongside** those who were writing to him and asking for his advice. But, in *Ephesians* someone is laying down the law and making suggestions and demands. The **tone is different** with directions coming down as something to do, but not as a colleague. Instead, the writer is a representative of God and the church. And, that becomes a very different aspect compared with many other letters related to Paul.

So, rather than get into the things we would like to avoid in *Ephesians* we will approach the more **global topics**, such as we have in our scripture lesson today. The emphasis is on **God's grace** and the fact that this is **no longer something secret** or held back from anybody. And, this is especially good news the **Gentiles** who are open to learning about the Gospel and, so far, have been welcomed entirely as they are: without enduring purification laws or establishing a pedigree identifying a Jewish ancestor. **God's grace** extends to **everyone**, and a lot of people, including Paul, spent a lot of time and energy getting the word out so that the church could open itself to the **whole world!**

So, that brings up lots of concerns for the early church, some of which still apply to us today:

- How do these concerns on salvation **affect me?**
- What must **I do** to take this in?
- What will **change** about me or who I am?
- What steps are necessary for me to stay in favor with God?

Our Reformed tradition gives us some truly Good News about all of those concerns. And, today we exhibit two outstanding ways to demonstrate being Presbyterian.” That is, keeping those Reformed traditions.

As stated in *Ephesians*, the Good News is available for **everyone**. And, **forgiveness** is open to all who believe. Everyone has the ability to **approach God** and to minister to another parishioner. This is possible because we are a **priesthood of ALL believers**. So, it is no coincidence that today we will install persons who have **answered God's call** to serve in ways that set their ministry apart as **ordered ministry**: the things that make the Church of Jesus Christ function, for we truly are the **hands and feet of Christ**.

As part of this installation, some of our ordained Ruling Elders will rotate off their time on Session, some remain for another year or two, and others are coming on board for up to three years. This ordered succession was the model for our federal and state governments with elected terms and **rotation of offices** in a peaceful transition of responsibility. This is because the leaders of our colonies and the federal government were either **Presbyterian or Episcopalian**. (Sorry, all you Lutherans. They had not immigrated to our shores in any significant numbers at that time. But, we love you, anyway!) Part of this influence arose during the Reformation. **Decent and in good order** was part of the system in Geneva, created and guided by our own **John Calvin**. We maintain that same sense of order today, and our installation later in the service is part of that tradition and **discipline of the church**.

In addition, we retain the **sacraments** of Baptism and the Eucharist. Like the early church being guided in *Ephesians*, we continue to serve the Eucharist throughout the church year. Under my time with you, we have moved from monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly administration of the Lord's supper to planning this sacrament around the major **celebrations** on our church calendar.

One of these we wish to call to our attention is our observance of **Epiphany** today. This marks the traditional day when **the Magi** were able to locate Jesus in Bethlehem where they paid homage to Him giving Him **extravagant gifts and worshiped Him**. These so-called Wise Men were prominent Gentiles who likely lived in modern Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and possibly India. And, the significance of the event is the demonstration that **Christ came for all the world**: Jews and Gentiles. Remember that people of a Jewish heritage are all Gentiles. But, the presence of the Magi, those outside of that tradition of Judaism, are part of the **Good News of salvation**. And, thankfully Christ did come of everyone. Otherwise, you and I would be out of luck even trying to worship God. We can only imagine ourselves standing outside a synagogue on a Sabbath morning, praying with those inside and doing our best to learn Hebrew in order to read the scriptures; because, as Gentiles we would not be part of the Jewish tradition worshipping God.

You see, we too often forget that we in the United States are **not the focus** of salvation for God and Christ, nor are we the sole intent of the Gospel story. Despite this knowledge, we have spent nearly two centuries in appointing ourselves as the rulers and controllers of the message of Christ. These verses in *Ephesians* tell us something **quite different**. We are blessed, not because of what we do or have done, but because God has given us the opportunity to come into the fold of believers through the **power of the Risen Christ**. And, the writer of *Ephesians* states it pretty clearly stating this for us.

And, thanks be to God that we **do not control the message**, because we would get it wrong: excluding people whom God clearly loves, despite their own actions and poor choices. In that frame of reference we are fortunate that God loves you and me, because none of us is truly worthy of that love or grace on our own. It is the **gift of God's power and mercy** that allows us to gather together and humbly approach God. That is **God's Word**: It is enough for you and me.

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