

Season after Pentecost - Psalm 150

July 15 & 16, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: John 14: 25-27; Ephesians 1: 1-14

“In Christ”

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In the New Testament era, Ephesus had a population of about 300,000. It was under the control of the Roman Empire and considered the fourth greatest city in the world, after Rome, Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch of Syria. Located in western Asia Minor (now Turkey), Ephesus had a great deal going for it. It had a harbor important for trade. It was located at an intersection of major trade routes. Ephesus therefore was a thriving commercial center. If that wasn't enough draw, Ephesus was also a major center for the worship for the mother goddess Diana (Artemis in Greek). The temple dedicated to her in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The city flourished as its Roman rulers continued to improve its infrastructure and add elaborate monuments, a library and a theater that could seat 25,000. St. Paul made Ephesus a center for evangelism for about three years (Ac 19:10). Despite the commercialism and pagan worship, the Christian church in Ephesus apparently flourished for some time.

Today we begin a four-week trip through Ephesians. Scholars dispute whether St. Paul actually wrote the letter or one of his followers wrote it in his name. (Not an unusual practice at that time.) Unlike most letters attributed to St. Paul, Ephesians does not address any particular error, heresy or local church controversy. It is a communication written to Gentile Christians in Asia Minor that "congratulates them on their inclusion in the Christian church and spurs them on to live out fully the implications of that inclusion." It is a dramatic call for unity based on God's activity, especially as centered in Baptism." Ephesians is a letter of instruction and celebration that tries to summarize God's work in and through Christ and us and what that means for living out our identity as children and a people of God. For me, it is not an easy read. The writing is dense — it seems you could spend an hour on one verse alone. Its theology — its explanations and descriptions of God

and faith — are deep. Yet the language can also be so lyrical that you fear you may rob it of its beauty if you try too hard to explain its meaning. Despite those biases, I do encourage you to slowly read Ephesians in these four weeks. It IS the word of God. It IS trying to help us grow in our appreciation of God, God's character and ways and what are then the characteristics and ways of those who follow our Lord Jesus. It IS worth our effort.

If you look at today's reading with me, I'd like to point out a recurring central theme. If you have a pen or pencil, you may want to mark it as I go along.

vs. 3 "who has blessed us *in Christ*

vs. 4 "just as he chose us *in Christ*...

vs. 5 He destined us for adoption as his children *through Christ*

vs. 6 "that God freely bestowed on us *in the Beloved*

vs. 7 *In him* we have redemption....

vs. 9 "that he set forth *in Christ*"

vs. 11. "*In Christ* we have also obtained an inheritance..."

vs. 13. "*In him* you also... were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit."

That phrase, "in Christ" is used frequently in our worship, prayers and other religious writings. I have signed letters, "Your sister in Christ" or "Yours in Christ." A "common description in the Scriptures of a follower of Jesus is that he or she is a person "in Christ."¹ In Ephesians alone, "In Christ" or a variation is used 34 times. But I'm not sure I ever dwelled on what "in Christ" means and especially, what says about how we live our faith and lives.

"To be "in Christ" does not mean to be inside Christ like a tool is in a tool chest or clothes are in a closet." As scripture describes it, being "in Christ" is to be organically [and mystically] united to Christ, as a limb is in the body or a branch is in the tree.... What distinguishes the true follower of Jesus is neither their creed, nor their code of ethics, nor their ceremonies, nor their culture, but Christ,"² a very real unity and relationship with Jesus. Now, that may seem to be simply words or poetry. But John records that Jesus prayed for his disciples, for you and me, saying, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

(John 17:23)

Jesus is not just a nice guy we are attached to like a child might be attached to his/her favorite blankie, binkie or stuffed animal. Jesus is God revealed to us in human flesh. Jesus came to live among us and to show us how to live as faithful believers in God. AND Jesus, God in flesh, came to show us God's character, God's ways and God's plans for saving all creation. AND Jesus came, so that we need not have any doubt, that we are God's beloved forever. It is through Jesus that our unity with God is made clear and certain. As Paul wrote in Romans, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

Here is one of the most amazing, almost unbelievable parts of being "in Christ" — we do not make it happen. We cannot win, achieve, buy, negotiate or weasel our way into Christ — into Father-Son-Holy Spirit. It is God's gift, freely given. That is one of the rationales behind our tradition of baptizing infants. "I baptize you *in the name of* the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It is not me or us that "make" a child of God. It certainly is nothing the infant has done. It is all God's doing. "Sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." It may be my fingers tracing oils on a forehead, but it's God — Father-Son-Holy Spirit - who has adopted and claimed you a "beloved" son or daughter. I may say the words of absolution after we confess our sins, but it is through Christ that Father-Son-Holy Spirit forgives and welcomes you home. Haven may be an authorized Christian worship community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American but it is God — Father-Son-Holy Spirit ---- who brings people together and unites them so that they may carry on God's work, as revealed in the life, death, resurrection and promised return. Apart from God, we are left to rely on our own good-meaning but flawed wills, our limited human resources, imaginations and goodwill. But IN Christ, THROUGH Christ, united with Father-Son-Holy Spirit, we have access to very power, guidance and love of God. IN CHRIST we are not alone, we are part of God's divine plan and energy at work, so that we help the world may know God's love... so that others may know through us God's healing, life-giving ways... so that we may know the abundance of true joy and peace that will lead us

to share it with others. That is our inheritance in Christ — not just a heavenly place to land on the other side of eternity but God’s very resources to use for the saving and healing of this world.

This first chapter of Ephesians is offering an orientation. It is trying to say, “This is who you are” when you say you are a follower of Jesus and “This is what it means.” “In Christ” is not a sentimental attachment to a tradition, building or memories. “‘In Christ’ we are transported into a new world. Being ‘in Christ’ [transforms] everything: we see ourselves and one another, neighbor or stranger, in a fresh way. ”In Christ’ every experience is reframed, from our most bracing joys and cherished achievements to our besetting temptations, our most anguished regrets, and our most wounding losses. ‘In Christ’ we are joined to the power and presence of God. ‘In Christ’ we are knit to others who will cry over our dead with us even as they help us sing hymns of resurrection.”³ In Christ we are united with God, all God’s people and all of God’s creation. That alone, when lived in its fullness, will change how we think of and treat others and how we approach our decisions, politics, spending, recreation and interactions. In Christ, through Christ, united with Father-Son-Holy Spirit and all of creation — that is who we are. Living into that loving and potent identity — letting God transform through the word, meal, service and community — is the way and wonder of faith. What can happens to individuals and churches when they live and move and have their being in Christ? What might happen to you, to me, to Haven if we would step over our fears, wariness, limitations to live more richly “in Christ” and the fullness of the love and power of Father-Son-Holy Spirit’s? Can we try?

Linda M Alessandri 7/15/17

ENDNOTES

1..John R. W. Scott, “In Christ” Knowing and Doing Summer 2007

2.. John R. W. Scott, “In Christ” Knowing and Doing Summer 2007

3..Sally A. Brown, “Commentary on Ephesians” 1: 3-14" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org