

Ephesians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ
Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the
Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing
in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ
before the foundation of the world to be holy and
blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption
as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the
good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious
grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In
him we have redemption through his blood, the
forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of
his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and
insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will,
according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,
as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things
in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we
have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined
according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all
things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who
were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the
praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard
the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had
believed in him, were marked with the seal of the
promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance

towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Who is This Church?

I'm doing something that I haven't done in a long time for the next few weeks, and that is that we are beginning a sermon series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Now, I have to confess that this isn't a very random series; for several years I have been trying to read my way through Eugene Peterson's *Practice Resurrection*, which uses Ephesians as a description of how we might "grow up in Christ." It's one of those books that is probably on some reformed theology professor's required reading lists in seminary. It's a good read, but it's a tough read. But there is great value in the work that Peterson did in his life and ministry, and I feel like we might learn more about who we are as Christians, and who we are as Church, by taking an in-depth look at this letter.

If you have had an opportunity to read our August newsletter, my letter on page one introduces Peterson's idea of growing up in Christ. Pastors and preachers across the decades have spent much time proclaiming what it means to be "born" in Christ. Whether that's being born again, being born from above as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, or being born anew, as we profess each week in our assurance of forgiveness. But here's the thing: Birth is the first step. However that happened for you, whether you had what John Wesley referred to as a moment when his heart was "strangely warmed," or a "born-again" experience, or simply knowing from the time you could talk that you had been baptized in Christ, birth in Christ is the first step. The second, third, fourth, and next steps are growing up in Christ.

From as early as we can recall, we are asked “what do you want to be when you grow up?” It’s an age old question, and my answers ranged from a professional cheerleader to a veterinarian, from a spotlight operator on Broadway to a seminary professor at Harvard, to a small church pastor. As we grow, our desires, which have always existed within us, mature and develop. It’s funny to look back on that list of things I said I wanted to be when I grew up—to some extent I’ve reached all of those goals in one vocation! You need a cheerleader when you’re not feeling good? Give me a call, I’ll perk you up, or try to at least! You need someone to love on your animals? I’ll be happy to! You want to learn more about God’s Word and our theology as Presbyterians? We can learn together. You desire a pastor who can be chief bottle washer? I’m your woman. Spotlight operator might be a little harder to find an analogy for, but we have shone a bright light on how to do church in the time of COVID, so there ya go!

You may be surprised that at one point in my life my dream was to be a spotlight operator on Broadway. My junior year in high school, I was working at the Newberry Opera House, and our high school band’s spring trip was to none other than New York City. We had the opportunity to see *Les Misérables* on Broadway, and I came home convinced that was what God wanted me to do with my life. The way the lighting technicians worked to highlight the main characters and disguise set transitions, the moving stages, all of it caused me to feel a strange warming of the heart.

But God does have a sense of humor, right? Practicing resurrection is growing up in Christ, staying rooted in Christ, and trusting God's call on our lives.

So, who is this church of Ephesus, exactly? Who is this Church, in general? Georges Bernanos, in his work *Diary of a Country Priest*, describes church as "not an ideal to be striven for; she exists and they're within her." Peterson defines church "as the textured context in which we grow up in Christ to maturity," but he goes on to suggest that church is difficult. He writes, "Sooner or later, though, if we are serious about growing up in Christ, we have to deal with church. I say sooner. I want to begin with church. Many Christians find church to be the most difficult aspect of being a Christian. And many drop out—there may be more Christians who don't go to church or go only occasionally than who embrace it, warts and all." So, church isn't simply this beautiful historic building, or your comfortable homes with a screen. Church is a complex, difficult, gathering, breathed into existence by the Holy Spirit. And it has been from the beginning of what we know as church.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is unique in that it is the only letter that is not provoked by some problem, whether of behavior or belief. Ephesians could have been a general church letter that circulated among the first-century congregations. The church in Ephesus itself was a missionary church established by Apollos. Paul stopped by to visit this fledgling Christian community in the course of his second missionary journey, met with the tiny congregation (there were only twelve of them,) and guided them into receiving the Holy Spirit. This was probably somewhere around the year A.D. 52. He stayed

on for three months, using the local synagogue as his center for preaching and teaching the kingdom of God. That three-month visit extended to three years. Paul, who probably expected to give them the first-century how-to-grow the kingdom sermon series for a few months, ended up being the pastor of this small but mighty church for three years.

Later, the name “Ephesus” was attached to a letter that provides our best access to what is involved in the formation of church, not so much the way the church appears in our towns and cities, but the essence that is behind the appearances: God’s will, Christ’s presence, and the Holy Spirit’s work. This trinitarian existence is what we must wrap our heads around if we are going to understand and participate rightly in any church that we are a part of. This is us.

So, this letter to the church in Ephesus is ad-hoc, not initiated by some problem, but is rather written to explore God’s glory that gives the church its unique identity. “Glory” is one of those church-y words that we really like to throw around, and it is a large word in our Scriptures, radiating the many dimensions of God’s grandeur, brightness, effulgence, and illuminating everything around it. Ephesians points out that none of us can comprehend this glory individually, each picking out items that appeal to us, cafeteria style. Rather, we do this work of exploration as a church, a congregation of Christians who sit down at table together and receive in gratitude what is prepared and served to us by our Lord, the Holy Spirit. God does church, and we participate in it through worship and growth.

It would be easy to identify the Ephesians as the “ideal” church, and it’s easy to see why some do. But other books of the Bible paint a different picture. Paul’s letters to Timothy, who was sent to be the Ephesians’ pastor, indicate there might have been some squabbling, gossip, and maybe even some meaningless chatter during services. While the letter to the Ephesians points us to how God has blessed and chosen us, the Ephesians had their own growing up in Christ to do. Later, in Revelation, John of Patmos writes out his vision for seven churches, one of which is Ephesus. In this vision, Jesus commends Ephesus for their “patient endurance.” 30 or 40 years since that time that Paul served as their pastor, the Ephesians found themselves in the midst of terrible persecution, and John of Patmos sought to give them some comfort. But, while they seemed to have patient endurance, Revelation 2 also points out they lost their love for one another. In verses 4-5 we read, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen.” A congregation without love? That doesn’t sound like the perfect church at all. And it wasn’t. And neither are we.

Everything we do as Presbyterians is framed in language of our “call.” We are called into membership. If you have been with us and would like to explore that call, I’ll be glad to talk to you about it. We are called into ordained offices of ruling and teaching elders. If this is a call you think you might want to answer, please phone me and I’ll help you navigate it. This idea of being called into existence with one another makes us who we are as church, and it’s part of what I think Peterson means when he talks about practicing resurrection. This call language comes directly from Paul. We are told that we

are blessed by God and chosen by God. Our response to God choosing us is our call to practice resurrection. To practice growing up in Christ. To practice, each and every day being the people God called us to be.

So who is this church, exactly? Our text today has seven verbs, in which God is doing and being: blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, gathered up. This church is blessed by God. What God *does* comes out of who God *is*. When we worship God, we let God be God, and bestow this blessing upon us. We are the church who is chosen by God. Now, before we get all puffy-chested and filled with pride, we're not the only ones, friends. When we make the decision to practice resurrection, we acknowledge this as being chosen by God, and respond by living accordingly, which means all those things Jesus talked about in his ministry: loving our neighbor, being kind, practicing patience, imitating Christ.

Who is this church? This church is blessed by God.
Who is this church? This church is chosen by God.
Who is this church? This church is destined to do God's work in the world.

This is the church where we find God's grace bestowed upon us.

This is the church upon which God lavishes that grace.

This is the church that reveals, makes known to us, God's very presence, and his will.

This church has been gathered up, to grow up in Christ, to do God's work in the world, and to love without abandon. Come into this church, friends, blemishes and all, and grow up in Christ. Amen.