

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Kingsley East

Travelers on a Journey

Ephesians 1:3-14

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In Christ, we are chosen. In Christ, we are redeemed. In Christ, we are sealed. In Christ, in Christ, in Christ. This is how Ephesians begins, and this is where we are called to go if we are going to become Christ in the world.

Over the past three weeks, we've been in a Season of Justice and Peace. Eric and Kathryn Freeman encouraged us to join Opal Lee in walking for Juneteenth and to heed Dori's words: "just keep swimming." We've read books together, prayed together, lamented, discerned, and now we want to know what to do about racial reconciliation. We want to know how to build a hospitality house. We want to know where to serve and how to become ambassadors for Christ in this time and this place.

I came into this season with hungry hands, ready to know what, where, when. How do we do this work? Where do I sign up? What times do we meet? And there are answers to those practical questions, but as we continue this work, though, just one week out from our series on justice and peace, we come to a text that predates the what, where, and when.

At the start of Ephesians, we return to the first question: Why? Why are we involved in the ministry of reconciliation? And the answer to that question is: Who?

In Christ, in Christ, in Christ. In Christ, we are a new family. As we've learned in a new way this year, our family is one of reconciliation. In Christ, we are adopted into a family of reconciliation.

The Letter of Ephesians is written "to the holy and faithful who are in Jesus Christ" (1:1). Many of the original versions of the letter didn't have the phrase "in Ephesus," so this letter comes to us simply as a letter to the Church, to all those in Christ. The themes running through Ephesians transcend a particular church's problems to address a church-wide issue: unity.

Centuries later, I think we can all agree that the church needs Ephesians. We need direction. How do we become unified? And maybe the harder question today is how do we talk about unity in the church? As Eric preached a few weeks ago, we've learned that we do not say "justice, justice" when there is no justice, and we do not say "freedom, freedom" when there is no freedom. So, what of our cries for "unity, unity?"

Cole Arthur Riley, the famous media writer for "Black Liturgies" posted a prayer that I shared with our Youth Group the other week. She prays to God saying, "In your very being, you possess a sacred community where each part is distinct and beautiful and necessary. Make our community like you, that we would no longer be content with the bland flavor of sameness.

That we would no longer use language of unity and oneness as a veil for the suppression of voice, body, and culture.”

One of our tasks as the church is to reconcile God’s Word with our world. In a world where unity became a hollow cry, and worse, an oppressive command, we, the church, remain people of this Book, and the Letter to the Ephesians tells us in chapter 2: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” (Eph. 2:13-16).

We turned unity into suppression, but unity is not that. Unity is, as Riley put it, Trinitarian. Unity is communal. It includes individual voices, bodies, and cultures. Unity brings people together and offers peace. Unity kills hostility. And through unity, we become a new family of reconciliation. In Christ, we become one body, but we do not become the same parts. Just as this passage distinguishes God the Father, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Seal, we the church are called into a communal life of both distinctness and oneness.

Growing up, my mom tried to get my brother and I to memorize Scripture verses. She would write out verses on a notecard and tape them to our bathroom mirrors. One week, she wrote out Philippians 2:2-3 and told us that this is our family verse: “Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” Later that week, I remember us all getting into the car to go to dinner. Within minutes, a question as simple as, “where should we eat” revealed that our family verse is a goal, not a reality. We are not quite of the same mind, but we are one family.

Like the church addressed to in Ephesians, we are one community with many distinct stomachs. At the time when this letter was written, Jews and Gentiles literally had different meal restrictions. They had different cultural norms that made their relationships with one another harder. We, too, as members of the same church, still have different tastes, desires, and understandings. Sometimes our differences divide us, and sometimes our differences complement one another, bringing distinct notes into one new beautiful song. When it comes to most church issues, though, we’re still waiting to hear the whole song.

As the writer of Ephesians describes our eternal hope and promised unity, a tension rises between the “already and not yet.” In verse 1, the writer says that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. In verse 11, the text says we have obtained an inheritance, like we already received these things. But at the end of this passage, the writer says that the Holy Spirit is our guarantee of an inheritance until we possess it. So, we don’t have the inheritance yet, or do we? Do we have the spiritual blessings now, or are we waiting for them? Yes.

Our undergraduates are in the middle of a book study on Angela Gorrell's *The Gravity of Joy*. One of my favorite discussions in this book is on liminal space. Dr. Gorrell describes liminal space in Easter terms. She says, "The majority of the time in our lives is spent living on Saturday, in the space between death on Friday and the indescribable joy of Sunday morning." She goes on to say, "Saturday is liminal space." This is the day when we look back on Friday's crucifixion; we still feel the suffering, loss, and despair of that day. This is also the day when we look ahead to the promise of resurrection, to the hope of restoration, and to the glory of our inheritance in Christ.

Liminal space—it's here right now, and it's not here yet. Isn't that where we, the church, live? We read this Word and believe in our heavenly oneness, and we walk around overwhelmed by our present woundedness. We are saints, and we are sinners. It's Saturday, but sometimes it still feels like Friday. When will the death, suffering, and loss end? When will the cosmic union, the bringing together of heaven and earth, begin?

In verse 4, we see that the cosmic unity began before the foundation of the world, when God chose us. God chose, destined, and adopted us before the world began. Before you and I could do the "right" thing or become the "right" people. Looking at verses 5-7, we are chosen "according to the good pleasure of his will," "to the praise of his glorious grace," "according to the riches of his grace." We are chosen not because of who we are but because of who God is. Not because we are "the" people, but because we are God's people.

And just as God chose Abraham, Sarah, and the people of Israel to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, God chose us to be a family who blesses others. Back in verse 4, it says God chose us "that we should be holy and blameless before him in love." Your translation may have the phrase "in love" with that sentence in verse 4 or at the start of the next sentence. Since it's all one line in the Greek, I like to spread the love over both verses. God adopts us in love, and God calls us to love. To be holy and blameless requires us to love.

And how do we do that? Well, that takes us back to the who: Jesus Christ. We become holy and blameless "in Christ, in the Beloved, in him, through Jesus Christ, through his blood." Some variation of this phrase appears eleven times in these eleven verses. We can't do it apart from Jesus. We can't become holy and blameless, and we can't transform into Christ's body without Him—our head.

Later in Ephesians chapter 4, the author says, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15-16). We grow up into Christ's body through love. As we grow, different parts come together with one goal.

The goal, as stated in verse 10, is unity with God and with all things in heaven and on earth. And the ultimate purpose of this goal comes at the very end of the text: "to the praise of his glory."

It's all about worship. Lifting up that one song made up of a million different notes and noises. Living in Christ, becoming Christ, being united together as distinct creatures, is all about praising God. Praising God is what we're made to do. Praising God makes us more ourselves. Praising God through the ministry of reconciliation transforms us into the family God made.

Earlier this summer, I had the joy of spending a few weeks with my brother and his family. My brother and sister-in-law have two daughters, 3 and 1.5 years old. Since my nieces are perfect to me, I was always very interested and attentive to how my brother and sister-in-law taught them not to do certain things. One teaching tactic that I really appreciated was when my niece would do something like not share with her younger sister, and my sister-in-law would explain to her what our family does. She would say something like, "I don't know what your friends at daycare do, but our family shares our toys with one another." Our family is kind, our family doesn't hit, our family forgives. With older kids, "our family makes the bed, our family takes out the trash, our family comes home at curfew." The list goes on and on when parenting, just as the list goes on and on for us.

God tells us who our family is and what we do as God's people. The list is long, especially in the Old Testament law sections and different parts of the New Testament, but Jesus sums it up for us in the gospels: love God and love you neighbor as yourself. Our church family loves. We love God, and we love others. To show us this love, Jesus comes down to earth, takes up his cross, and invites us to walk with him. We are invited to take up our cross daily and follow him.

When I imagine taking up my cross, I think of hunching my back and dragging a huge piece of wood behind me like this. I feel the wood dig into my shoulder, pressing my body down, and forcing my eyes to the ground. There are beautiful images and icons of this way of carrying our cross. But what if we held our crosses in a different way? What if we carried the cross the way that Jesus did? Jesus died with his arms stretched open.

What if we carried our crosses with the beam across our shoulders and wrapped our hands around the edges, forcing our chest and head up to see the world around us. What if we bound our hands to the edges of the cross as Jesus' hands were nailed open so that when we want to pull our hand away, when we want to say, "no, not for you, not today," we are, through the cross, bound to our neighbors?

Bound to the cross, we become people in Christ who are tied to one another. A family of cross-bearers. Always open to others.

I tried this cross-bearing posture out the other day when Jonathan Pinto and I moved the outdoor cross inside the church. I thought that before I preach an idea, I should see if it holds up. And oddly enough, it worked. Carrying the cross with outstretched arms was lighter, and I could look up to see where I was going. But I needed Pinto there with me. When I first tried to position the cross from one shoulder to across my back, I nearly flung the cross at Pinto because I couldn't get both of my hands wrapped around it on my own. This isn't just a sermon illustration; it really happened. I needed a companion with me to help me carry my cross.

I love our song of preparation from this morning because it sings this same message:

*We are travelers on a journey,
fellow pilgrims on the road.
We are here to help each other
walk a mile and bear the load."*

In the youth group, we all sing this song for our benediction on Wednesday nights. It's a tradition that predates me, and I brought it back to our youth meetings now that we can meet together and sing. The youth may not be this sentimental about it yet, but I love singing this song with them because as we sing it, I feel us transforming.

At youth camp a few weeks ago, we walked through trails between activities singing this song and spreading peace with everyone who walked by (and definitely wanted to hear our voices), and I felt us becoming the words we were saying. New students and new volunteers learned the words, old students were reminded of the song, and we all became a group of pilgrims on a trail.

As I look ahead to what our work as a family of reconciliation is, I imagine dozens of ideas and projects. Different ways to answer the what, where, and when. But I see only one binding solution that will allow us to flourish in this work: Jesus Christ. In Christ, we stretch open our arms to one another and to our neighbors, and we walk.

We travel together, bringing light into the nighttime of fear, bringing the peace we all long to hear.

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