

Ephesians 1:3-14

Before Fr. Mark left for vacation, we discussed and agreed to have a preaching series on the book of Ephesians...and it begins today with the first chapter of Ephesians. So let's begin with a few basics – Ephesians is an epistle, which is just a fancy word for a letter, and it was written by St. Paul, the apostle, while he was imprisoned in Rome around 62 ACE. While sometimes it seems as though Paul is firing off angry epistles, in the case of the letter to the Ephesians, it's clear he intends the letter to lift up the community, ground them in God's love and grace, and be circulated by the church in Ephesus to their neighboring churches. It's also clear that Paul never expected his letters to become part of Holy Scripture as they are now in our canon. Just imagine the letters or emails you write becoming foundational to an entire faith community and read for centuries to come...we'd probably change some of what we wrote if we knew it...and I dare say that's true of Paul too, so I try and be gracious with some of the things he wrote in his epistles.

Think for a moment about some of the more meaningful letters (or emails) you have written or received over the years. Some of them, perhaps, have become almost sacred to you – love letters from your significant other from decades ago or letters you wrote to your child or to your parent or friends. Some letters are keepers – and Paul's letters were keepers to the communities who received them. My parents recently shared with me letters they had saved that I sent to them while serving in Thailand. And two years ago I went to stay with my best friend and who I have known since we were (awkwardly) 14 years old and who I affectionately nicknamed Beenie. Back in those days as teenagers we didn't have cell phones to text one another, so instead, Beenie and I would pass hand written letters to one another in between classes. Amazingly, my sweet best friend kept every single one of those letters and she brought them out of a box from her garage so that we could scour through them and laugh and sometimes cry through them. In the letters we joked a lot, we talked about the boys we had crushes on, we discussed upcoming events and plans, revealed secrets, and sometimes we even got a little philosophical about life, about suffering, and about the things we were struggling with, all while encouraging

each other through the angst of teenage-hood. These are not letters for sharing with others – but they have a sacred quality about them to us now, all these decades later, because they reveal something about the love and relationship between us.

Paul's letters reveal the love and relationship he had with the churches he planted, but more importantly, they reveal the love and relationship that God in Christ has with God's people. The epistles of the Bible transcend time, are inspired and inspiring, and, I believe, can be read like ancient love letters from God to us – growing ever more sacred and special as the years pass.

With that framework in mind- let's dig into some of the specifics of the opening of this particular letter. First we should note the recipients lived in and around Ephesus in ancient Greece (now Turkey) - which was at the time considered the "gateway to Asia" because it was on the major trade route between Rome and Asia. Ephesus was also the center of pagan worship because the Temple of the Greek goddess Artemis (or Diana as the Romans called her) was located there- this was one of the 7 ancient wonders of the world - and travelers came from all over to purchase the trinkets and statues of the goddess that had been created by the blacksmiths there. It was also home to a large Jewish community. We know that Paul traveled to Ephesus on his way back from Corinth and planted a church and stayed there for about three years – which was a very significant period of time to teach and build relationships. He befriended a couple named Aquilla and Priscilla – a husband and wife team who became what he described as his "co-workers" in Christ and who ultimately took over the leadership and ministry of the church when Paul left. Priscilla is one of the earliest examples of what we might call a female pastor and we learn in the book of Romans that Priscilla and her husband actually risked their lives for Paul when things got heated. The reason things became heated and dangerous for Paul and the early church leaders, as we learn in the book of Acts, is because their ministry had become so successful that it began to impact the economy and trade of the blacksmiths in Ephesus. So many people in and around Ephesus had become Christians and had turned to prayer and the church for their healing and salvation that they had stopped buying the pagan goddess

trinkets and statues...it was hurting business big time! The local blacksmiths became so angry that they organized and began a riot and nearly killed Paul's traveling companions over it. Being a Christian in those days was not a safe bet, as we know. Paul was beaten and imprisoned on multiple occasions for spreading the faith, while the other apostles were ultimately killed for their commitment to Jesus. Paul writes from prison with this in mind.

And so the letter to the Ephesians opens with blessings – the blessing of God and the blessing on all God's people in Christ...this double blessing in the opening is called an "epizeuxis" - it was used to convey extreme emphasis – it's similar to when we write in repetition, saying things like "it was really really soooooooo great!" We are really, really soooooo blessed by God in Christ. In fact, Paul writes in verse 4, we were "chosen before the foundation of the world." The point here is that we are not randomly God's children – we've been chosen and destined for love and blessing by God, before time as we know it even began. This love is the opposite of haphazard or inconsequential and it echoes Psalm 139:16 where we read about God ordaining our days - writing them in our book before we came to be! Friends, this letter is a love letter – you are loved by God so much – that this love and blessing on you was there before you came into being on the planet.

And then verse 5 tells us that we were destined for adoption. This idea of adoption in ancient Rome was very different than the way we think of adoption today. Adoption in ancient Rome was not secretive or shameful in any way - nor did it sever one's ties with one's family of origin -it was instead a way to reinforce inter-family ties and political alliances. Adoption was generally a privileged situation in which the child enjoyed both the original and the adoptive family connections. Paul goes on to say that we too, then, adopted as we are by God, have been given "full rights" as children of God – in fact, we are co-heirs with Jesus and share his "inheritance" and status and have the same access to resources. Think about that for a moment.

And then, as we conclude the opening of the letter, we read this statement, "In Christ 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 toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory." You may recognize that these are some of the same words we say at baptism – after the baptismal candidate has been baptized with water in the name of the Trinity, we anoint their foreheads with oil, making the sign of the cross, and saying these words, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." The idea of a "seal" in ancient times, often made of wax or embedded in some way as an imprint- was a guarantee of security or ownership. Even today, a seal makes something official – think of the seal of a notary public or the seal on a diploma. So, in other words, to be sealed by the Holy Spirit is to say that you are so loved as God's child, that God's very imprint is on you – that your very soul bears the mark of belonging to God in Christ and that all the blessings that come with that honor are yours. "Signed sealed delivered I'm yours" ...I'm yours God. We have been lavished with God's grace, blessings, and love – and this letter is written to prove it. More next week...and thanks be to God!