

Second Sunday of Christmas

The theme for this week is God the gatherer, emphasizing God's desire to include everyone, even those marginalized by culture. The call to worship Psalm discusses the ways God looks after and provides for human beings, including them in his blessings. Jeremiah talks about God's plan to gather and comfort the ancient Israelites who were scattered as the result of foreign conquerors, and John tells about Jesus and how he gathered us into himself to become "children of God." Last, Ephesians 1:3-14, our sermon text, reveals God's wish to gather all people, in all their uniqueness, into loving relationship in Christ.

God Gathers Diverse People

Ephesians 1:3-14

If you've done any traveling, you've probably noticed cultural differences, often within the same country or even the same state or province. There are different accents and different slang words, depending on where you are. In the Midwestern part of the U.S., a soft drink like Coke would be called "pop," but on the Eastern or Western coasts, it would be called "soda," and in the South, it's called a "coke"—regardless of the carbonated soft drink's flavor. These are simple examples of how different people experience and label the world. Culture influences how we talk, the language we use, and the systems (or rules) that are in place to help everyone coexist.

Unfortunately, some systems unfairly benefit some people and hurt others, especially those who don't conform to cultural expectations. God, on the other hand, welcomes diversity. The book of Ephesians offers us wisdom about navigating the choppy waters of diversity. It's a letter written by a Jew (Paul) to a Gentile audience with a message that emphasizes how God has broken down the cultural wall between these two different groups—keeping in mind that any non-Jew was considered a Gentile. In Christ, God resolved the animosity that diversity can bring. Let's look at Ephesians 1:3-14 to see how God gathers us together.

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. (Ephesians 1:3-6 NRSV)

The passage begins by praising God for blessing us all—Jews and Gentiles—with spiritual blessings in Christ. God is the giver of all good gifts and we are the recipient of those gifts. The greatest blessing or gift he gave us is Jesus, and only Jesus can give us the spiritual blessings the rest of the passage speaks of.

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. (Ephesians 1:7-10 NRSV)

The blessings include:

A new identity—“being holy and blameless before him in love”

Adoption—“as his children through Jesus Christ”

Grace—“that he freely bestowed on us in the beloved”

Redemption—“through his blood”

Forgiveness—“according to the riches of his grace”

Knowing the mystery of his will—“according to his good pleasure”

An inheritance—“having been destined according to the purpose of him”

Given the Holy Spirit—“the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption”

All who are in Christ are given these blessings—spiritual blessings in Christ. Sadly, many believers feel they have a special link to the blessings of God that others don't have. Perhaps they believe...

... their day of worship is better than others—and thus they judge.

... their method of worship is better than others—and thus they judge.

... their theology is better than others—and thus they judge.

... their race is better than others—and thus they judge.

... their gender is better than others—and thus they judge.

See a pattern here? Paul was continually dealing with Jews judging Gentiles and Gentiles judging Jews. Sadly, judgment continues today. We judge denominations; we judge methods of worship; we deal with misguided notions of superiority; we judge things we do not understand. Paul wanted to emphasize a couple points:

All are blessed

Paul is making the point here that all who are in Christ have the same spiritual blessings—every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. This includes a new identity, forgiveness, redemption, grace, adoption, inheritance, knowing the mystery of his will and being given the Holy Spirit. Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free—all are blessed in Christ.

None of this was an afterthought or a plan B. It was “before the foundation of the world,” and our adoption gave God great pleasure. “The riches of his grace” was “lavished on us,” without any prerequisites to meet.

Even the adoption wording here is interesting in that it is not speaking to an individual but to a community, and it hearkens back to God’s choosing of Israel back in the Old Testament. Community, the gathering of all people, is the emphasis, not individual believers and personal salvation. God is throwing the doors to the kingdom open wide.

All are forgiven

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. (Ephesians 1:7-10 NRSV)

Our sin of believing we were cut off or separated from God because of things we have said, done, or thought, has been forgiven—proven by Jesus’s willingness to shed blood as a witness of God’s grace. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus says in John 14:9 (NRSV). In submitting to the suffering of the cross, Jesus showed God’s willingness to absorb our hatred and our death into himself, only to transform it into life and love. It’s a mystery to us, this love and grace, and it fulfills

the plan “before the foundation of the world” to bring everything together: heaven and earth united in Christ.

All are included

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 toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:11-14 NRSV)

Our commonality is our inheritance, the seal (or presence) of the Holy Spirit. This shared spirit enables us to live and thrive despite cultural differences or even our individual human eccentricities. We experience transformation as we embrace our inheritance and acknowledge God’s gathering of all people in Christ. The Holy Spirit enables us to widen our view to see how all the pieces of the world are necessary to create the beauty of the whole. It’s like the fractals of a kaleidoscope view—we don’t realize how many diverse components, whether in people, culture, or nature, create the entirety of our human experience.