

July 15, 2018
8th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Sermon series: *Life in Christ*
Part 1: “Chosen and Blessed” - Ephesians 1:3-14
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Imagine in your mind’s eye, that this afternoon we gather together outdoors alongside a wide stream that runs clear and swift and sparkling. At first it looks like it might be easy to wade in and cross this stream. But don’t be fooled, y’all! The current here is strong enough to sweep us off our feet once we step into its powerful waters. We need to find some solid stones to get our footing in order to begin making our way across this fast-moving stream.

We actually *have* entered into an ancient mighty, ever-flowing stream this morning. We waded into it in the reading from the letter to the Ephesians. It is a stream of praise to God for who God is, what God has done and is doing. This letter begins in the language of worship and poetry. The writer starts by stacking superlative on top of superlative, weighted phrase upon weighted phrase. He is exuberant in his praise of God and what God’s grace has done for us. Today we embark on a series of sermon reflections on this letter to the Ephesians. It may have been written to a church in Ephesus, but more likely was written to a group of churches. Either Paul or one of his followers is believed to be its author.

Our launching point into this stream of praise is mentioned three times in ch.1, verse 3: “**BLESSED** BE THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST...WHO HAS **BLESSED** US IN CHRIST...WITH EVERY SPIRITUAL **BLESSING**.” We’re about to set foot into the stream, stepping on the solid rock of BLESSING.

What do we mean when we talk about being “blessed” or receiving a “blessing”? At its most basic level when we’re referring to people, receiving a blessing means “to receive God’s favor”. We bless all manner of ordinary and important things in our lives - back packs, our homes, beginning a journey or starting a new school year, our pets and other living creatures. And as a church, we pronounce God’s blessing on the marriage of a couple. The priest offers a blessing for anyone who desires it at the time we come to receive the Eucharist. The priest pronounces God’s blessing on the congregation before the final hymn and dismissal.

Wednesday was the 3rd anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. As I was remembering that joyous day in 2015, I recalled that at the conclusion of the service after the final hymn and dismissal, there is a lovely tradition in which the congregation is invited to come forward and receive a “blessing” from the newly ordained priest. What a privilege and powerful experience it was. For me it was actually one of the most moving parts of the entire ordination service. The act of offering blessings, speaking God’s favor over people I know, love and cherish, people who have nurtured, supported and mentored me in the faith – all of it was part of the work of Christ’s Church. It was very organic, like completing and continuing a never ending circle of grace. It began with

God's favor – poured out in Christ and carried on by the Church, entrusted to me in ordination, passed on to the persons for whom I offered a blessing, and ultimately the praise circled back to God, the source of all blessing.

Forever and always God is the one who initiates any blessing. From the very beginning, God has been determined to bless humankind. Starting with creation, the blessing moved through God's covenant relationship with the people of Israel, and intensified dramatically in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. God's blessing, God's favor comes to us in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and in the other sacramental rites of the Church - confirmation, reconciliation of a penitent, marriage, ordination, and anointing the sick. God has always been intent on blessing us, lavishly pouring out Divine goodness and favor.

In Latin the word is "*benedicere*" – *dicio* means "speak" and *bene* means "well". So blessing means saying good things of someone, speaking well of a person. And who of us does not need to hear good things spoken to us, and said about us? We're not talking about fake flattery, but sincere and heartfelt good will. Our ears are so keenly attuned to pick up the negatives we hear daily, in our own minds, and from sources outside us - words of rejection, failure, shame, guilt, threat, blame, ridicule, fear, and despair. So I appreciate how Roman Catholic priest and spiritual author Henri Nouwen reflects on blessing. He says: "To give a blessing is to affirm, to say "yes" to a person's Belovedness. And more than that: to give a blessing creates the reality of which it speaks. A blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness, their true self."

In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen shares a story from his work in a group home with physically and mentally challenged people. One of the residents, Janet, came and asked Henri for a blessing. He sort of perfunctorily made the sign of the cross on Janet's forehead. She protested vehemently and said, "No that doesn't work. I want a real blessing." He didn't know exactly what she wanted, but he told her he would give her a real blessing when they met for prayer service in her home later that day. So when about thirty of them had gathered and were sitting in a circle on the floor for their prayer service, Henri started out by saying that Janet had asked him for a special blessing, because she needed that right now. He still didn't know what Janet wanted, but she didn't leave him in doubt for long. As soon as Henri told the group Janet had asked for a special blessing, she stood up and walked toward him. He was wearing an alb with big, roomy sleeves. She put her arms around Henri and rested her head against his chest. Nouwen says: "Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost disappeared in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, "Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you."

Janet raised her head and looked at Henri. Her broad smile showed him that she had really heard and received the blessing. When Janet returned to her place, another resident Jane, and then another resident, and another – many of the physically and mentally challenged people living there came - expressing that same desire to be blessed. And so also did a twenty year old young man who was a staff member in the home.

Nouwen says: “We need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by Divine love on every step of our lives.” (story and quotes from *Life of the Beloved*, by Henri Nouwen).

God in Christ has said an emphatic “Yes” to our Belovedness, our preciousness to God. God in Christ has shown us that love *will* guide us every step of our lives. That’s what this Ephesians passage of praise is about. And while God does bless individuals, and the Church does practice blessing individuals, this letter is written to a church or group of churches, a community of believers. This implies that as a community of faith, as a congregation, our vocation, our calling is to become a **community of blessing, whose purpose is to bless others with Christ’s love.**

So – what might the life of a *community of blessing* look like? If Trinity was living into its fullness as a community of blessing, what would be distinctive about us? What would people with no church affiliation see in us that would make them sit up and take notice and ask themselves, “How can I find what these people have?”

This passage that opens Ephesians suggests four markers that are present in a community that is unafraid to boldly wade into that stream of praise to God, because the community is convinced of the absolute dependability of God’s love shown to us in Christ. A church that sees itself as a community of blessing is continually fueled by the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

- The 1st marker of a community of blessing is its **ACCEPTANCE OF BEING CHOSEN BY GOD.** “. . . God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love.” With gratitude, members of a community of blessing accept the fact that we are accepted. God has chosen us and given us a purpose. Being a community of blessing means this community is the recipient of God’s unconditional regard. It means this community is not and will not be alone. God will accompany us wherever we go because God has chosen us and promised to be with us. In a community of blessing, it feels like we have the capacity to rise above our present challenging circumstances, whatever they are. A community of blessing is more than the sum of its parts and more than its past experiences. In a community of blessing, every member feels like she and he has worth, not because of something we did or might do, but simply because God has looked with favor on us and chosen us to be bearers of divine light and love.

- The 2nd marker of a community of blessing is **JOY**. The opening of this letter to the Ephesians is utterly saturated with intense and unfettered joy at God's favor demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Christ. Life has taken a 180 degree turn around and there is joy in that turning! In a community of blessing, joy is evident in its worship and fellowship – you can sense the Spirit's presence when they gather. Joy is visible in the desire to learn, serve, and grow together. Joy bubbles up to the surface and overflows in gratefulness. A community of blessing habitually gives thanks for all that God has done, and is now doing in its midst, and the goodness, love, and joy flow out to the world beyond its doors. We feel joy in widening our welcome. Joy is contagious when even the littlest ones can be heard saying with us in worship "Alleluia" and praying with us "Amen".
- The 3rd marker of a community of blessing is **FORGIVENESS AND HEALING**. The author writes in the opening of this letter, *"In him we have redemption . . . the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that God lavished on us."* This is about our trusting in God's ability and desire to transform and bring new life to all people. It is about taking seriously the notion that God loves us too much to leave us where God finds us – individually, and as a faith community. God desires abundant life for us. God desires for us freedom from the things that bind us, that block us from health and wholeness and deepening spiritual maturity. God desires fruitfulness from our discipleship that leads to healing and reconciliation in all our relationships, including restoration in the fragile natural world of God's creation.
- And the 4th marker of a community of blessing is **GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT**, the desire to be a blessing to others because we are so grateful for God's unfailing love showered upon us. Generosity is seen in the desire to share God's love, to freely and lavishly give love away, as we have received it. This includes, but is not limited to giving money. It is also about giving our time, our skills and abilities, our attention, our prayers, our willingness to invest and reach out and meet those who hunger to experience the loving, liberating, and life-giving power of Jesus. A community of blessing is all about love, because love is who God is. As presiding Bishop Michael Curry is fond of saying, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

There is an important question for each of us to think about and answer: Does Trinity feel like a community of blessing to you? Does it look like a community of blessing in its actions? This series of sermons on the letter to the Ephesians is aimed at our becoming more clearly a community of blessing.

In the July newsletter senior warden Cheryl Stearn wrote about the vestry's recent meeting with Canon for Congregational Development The Rev. Dan Morrow. Dan spoke to the vestry about healthy and unhealthy ways of communicating, which directly impact how we manage our differences and conflict. Dan also offered us a sample

vestry covenant, a statement of how we intend to treat each other as we engage in Christ's ministry as a church family. The vestry has agreed that we want to support and hold each other accountable for walking the way of Jesus' love. There are copies of the covenant on the back table you may take with you, read and pray over. There is an additional sheet for signatures of anyone in the congregation who wants to join the vestry and clergy in living into this covenant to become a community of blessing.

Will you join us in striving to live as a community of blessing? What we're really doing is calling each other to uphold our baptismal covenant. We have been chosen by God. Given new life in Christ and bathed in grace and joy. Soothed again and again with the balm of healing and forgiveness. Granted grateful, servant hearts that overflow with acts of generosity and love.

My brothers and sisters, God's all-embracing, transforming love is a powerful stream that already flows around us and flows on out ahead of us. God's Spirit beckons us to step into this healing stream together. We might get swept along in the flow of goodness and mercy, and end up lost in wonder, love, and praise, just like that writer of the letter to the Ephesians did.

Let's take this risk together. Hold one hand out for God, and with the other grasp firmly the hand of a fellow brother or sister in Christ, because we are meant to bask in the restoring waters of God's mercy and eternal love, living with peace at the last and justice for all. Be prepared to get wet! It's possible our feet might slip out from under us and we'll fall headlong, splashing into that stream of God's grace and eternal love. But would that be so bad, really?

Nah! Blessed are we! Blessed to be a community of blessing for others. Always – and forever. Amen.