

July 15, 2018
Ephesians 1:1-14
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“Will and Way”

Good morning! It is good to back preaching to a group of people whom I know and can actually see. Thanks again to Kathy Nowicki and Gary Arnold for facilitating the sermon last Sunday. I wish all of you could have experienced the worship service in Cincinnati; I would have been especially glad to have some of you who actually laugh at my humor. It was a great experience for me, and an opportunity which will likely not happen again.

I had to do some research for the sermon this morning after my initial study of this text from Ephesians: I eventually ended up with a Bible commentary, but I started with Emily Post. Do you know who Emily Post is? I doubt if she's alive any longer, but the book with her name on it is still the authority on etiquette, or what is considered to be good manners, or socially acceptable behavior. Emily Post can tell you which fork to use for dessert, if there is more than one on the table by your plate -- stuff like that. I went to Emily Post because I wanted to see if there is ever an occasion when you receive a gift that it's not necessary to send a thank-you note. The answer is no. Showers, condolences, graduation, congratulations, and *especially* weddings, get those thank you notes written. Tim and I were blessed with wedding presents from two different congregations in California and Indiana, and I remember how anxious I was to get those notes out in time, and how creative I had to be to say Thank-you for some appliances that I really didn't want or need.

Ephesians chapter 1 is an extended thank-you from a follower of Jesus -- probably a student of the Apostle Paul -- sent to the church at Ephesus. Because this letter does not include references to specific situations or concerns, it would have been widely circulated churches all over the Christian world. The first two verses or a standard form of

greeting, a polite and generic Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And then comes verse 3, which one scholar calls “liturgically majestic” and another refers to as “monstrous.” Let me see if I can say it one breath, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us 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.” One sentence -- a whole lot of blessing. Us blessing God because God has blessed us and chosen us in Christ before the world began. If there was ever a gift which deserved a thank you, it is the gift of being chosen by God: redemption through his blood and forgiveness of sin according to the riches of grace that are lavished on us. If you have accepted that gift of grace -- or even if you put it in the back of the closet and have just now remembered that it’s there -- it is never too late, according to Emily Post, to send a thank you note.

Of course, the riches of grace are not exactly the kind of gift you can wrap up in a box, and God doesn’t have an address where we can send a note and know that we have done what etiquette requires. Grace -- the blessing of God through Christ-- is a free gift, but if we choose to accept it, grace puts some demands on us. There is a word which captures both meanings of this for me -- it is an English word, so its double meaning is only in this passage as we read it in translation; it would not been part of the original Greek text. It’s a helpful way for me to understand this passage, and I hope it can be for you, too. The word is will, both in the sense of wanting to do something and a document which lists the terms of an inheritance. This passage talks both about God’s will -- what God wants to do, demonstrated by Christ -- and the inheritance which we have received in Christ. Both God’s purpose and what we have inherited mean that there are some things we need to do.

And this, brothers and sisters is what we need to do: live our lives to fulfill God’s purpose. I know that’s not a very specific road map -- this passage is probably not going to tell you what you should order for lunch today -- but it might help get your feet pointed in the right direction, or bring you back if you have been on the wrong path. The author of Ephesians uses this lovely phrase, “we are to live for the praise of his glory,” that’s in verse 12, and then in verse 14 we’re told

again that “pledge of our inheritance is toward the redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.” As I understand this passage, this means that our purpose is to live so that we reflect the glory of God.

Glory is a term which is used a lot in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, this opening of Ephesians is compared to a Jewish prayer of thanks, because of the gratitude and emphasis on God’s glory. In Greek, the original language of this letter, the word for glory is *doxa*, which is also translated as *brightness*. It’s where we get the word doxology, which means words about God’s glory, or words about the light of God. You know the opening words of the doxology we sang this morning: Praise God from whom all blessing flow. That is exactly the spirit and the topic of the opening of Ephesians. That is the thank you note which we owe back to God, and it is never too late to thank God for the gift of our lives and the gift of Jesus Christ.

But we need to do more than thank God for our lives. We actually need to live in such a way that God is glorified, that we reflect that brightness of God so that other people can see it in us. Treating other people the way we want to be treated is the lowest bar to clear: you don’t even have to be Christian to do that -- Emily Post can tell you how to be polite and well-mannered. There are plenty of nice people who are not followers of Jesus. Loving our neighbors -- actually making an effort to find out who they are and to care about their welfare -- is a significant next step. Loving our enemies is a huge step beyond that, and something which we can probably get to only with Christ’s help -- and even then it’s a tall order. Our goal is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. If we don’t have the desire to do this, I guarantee it will not happen just with a vague notion to be a good person; we have to have the will to glorify God before we will know the way to glorify God.

We have youth and adults here who will be leaving at the end of this week to travel to National Youth Conference or NYC. There are other adults in this congregation who have attended NYC as youth or advisors: Sue Noffsinger, Stephen De Pue, Valerie Rodgers, Tim McFadden -- there are probably others. This conference is held in Fort Collins, CO, every four years. You have probably been around the Church of the Brethren in some formative years if you hear about

NYC and think of National Youth Conference instead of New York City. NYC is a wonderful opportunity; it was significant for me as a high school youth, and four years ago as an advisor. The theme this year is Bound Together, Clothed in Christ. Our youth and youth from around the country will have the chance to witness God's glory in the majesty of creation and the Rocky Mountains. Our youth and youth from around the country will have the chance to experience God's glory in worship services, and small groups and teaching sessions. Our youth and youth from around the country will have the chance to witness to God's glory -- in the way you interact with others, and through service projects in the Fort Collins community. This happens not only with the encouragement and permission of your parents, but with the blessing and financial support of this congregation. At the end of our anointing service this morning, we'll invite those NYC participants forward and include them in our blessing and sending. May God give each one of us both the will and the way to live for his glory, wherever we are blessed and sent.