

“Signed, Sealed, Delivered”
Ephesians 1:3-14; Psalm 85:8-13
First Presbyterian Church
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The Ephesians text for today is really quite incredible. To begin with, in the Greek, it is one long sentence. It is almost as if Paul just doesn't have time to breathe, given the panorama of divine events that are passing before his eyes. He sees God giving us gift after gift, wonder after wonder! It is astounding. It is amazing. It is almost beyond description, but Paul is in a rush to share as much as he can in the short space of time that he has. His vision runs from a time before anything was created clear through to the time when the faithful will dwell with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in their fullness. No wonder he cannot stop for his copyist to add punctuation!

He begins with the realization that God has chosen us, not we him. That choosing began in what Karl Barth, probably the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th Century, calls the inner-trinitarian decree. In the depths of eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit determined that they would one day dwell with human beings as a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, everything that flows out of that moment is done on behalf of the human family. The creation provides a place where God and humanity may meet as human beings. The human family is then brought into being, but because we humans choose to turn away from God and do our own thing, God could have trashed us; tossed us to the dogs.

Instead, because of his love and purpose for us, he will not be thwarted by our ignorance and stupidity. Jesus will meet us even in our sin. He will meet us right where we are. But like so many of our kind before and after us, we don't recognize him for who and what he is. We toss him on the trash heap. We do our worst to him. We crucify and bury him. Even then, he still doesn't give up on us. He rises from the dead with his arms extended wide in welcome and invitation. “Come to me. Let me lift your burdens. I have removed your sins, hurts, and pains. Now come.” Millions around the world, across the ages, have said “yes” to that invitation. But if you are like I am, that “yes” is more resounding some days than it is on others. I am still drawn away from him to things of little consequence. But if we will wait on Jesus, he will make us what he wants us to be—persons different from what those who do not know him.

The proof of all this is a gift he gives us. Paul put it this way:

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.”

The Holy Spirit is proof-positive that God is with us in Jesus. It is something that is tangible and that we can feel moving in our lives. The words used here, “the first installment,” are a translation of a Greek word that can also be translated as “down-payment.” A woman goes out to sell a cow and is given a “down-payment,” ensuring her that she will receive the sum-total later. We usually, especially when preaching, try to figure out how the texts relate to life in this world. But that isn't the only message of the scriptures. The other half of the message is that this world is not the end of us or of God's purposes for us. There is life beyond death. It is that of which the “down-payment” of the Spirit is

assuring us. We will one day live fully with God, and all the barriers will be dropped. We should be looking forward, and in that forward look should be our hope for today.

Eons ago when I was in seminary, there were groups and churches who made up what was known as the “charismatic movement.” These were people who had read the New Testament, heard Jesus’ promise that he would send the Holy Spirit to them, read about the Day of Pentecost, and read Paul’s comments about the gifts of the Spirit. They looked at the churches of their day and saw only tradition, inactivity, and what they perceived to be stagnation. They wanted something more. Small groups formed, and they prayed for the gifts of the Spirit. The most visible gift, and often the touchstone of whether one had truly received the Holy Spirit, was the gift of tongues. It was a prayer language that was unintelligible both to the speaker and the hearer, but it was believed to be like the gift of tongues that Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians 14.

Some churches found a new vibrancy brought about by this movement. I had an Episcopal friend in seminary whose father was utterly inactive, as far as church was concerned. He never went. One day, however, he attended a charismatic meeting and received the gift of tongues. He made no big deal out of it. He didn’t feel it somehow made him superior to others. He just suddenly became an active participating member of his local Episcopal church. He was different. He had been changed. That is why Jesus came into the world to be with us. He came to make us different, each in our own unique ways, but in particular, radically different from the rest of the world.

William Barclay, in his commentary on Galatians and Ephesians makes the following observation.

[Quote] In the early Church, Christians never had any doubt that they must be different from the world; they, in fact, knew that they must be so different that the probability was that the world would kill them and the certainty was the world would hate them. But the tendency in the modern Church has been to play down the difference between the Church and the world. We have, in effect, often said to people: “As long as you live a decent, respectable life, it is quite all right to become a church member and to call yourself a Christian. You don’t need to be so very different from other people.” In fact, Christians should be easily identifiable in the world.¹ [End Quote]

What should make us identifiable is that we bear the Spirit of the Kingdom of God, not the spirit of the kingdom of the world. The Holy Spirit pulls the future into the present. It changes our values and reorders our priorities. People matter over things. Peace is preferable to war. People that the world would put on the fringes of society have always been God’s principal concern. Where women have been excluded, Jesus calls for equality. Where persons have been segregated because of race, Jesus calls for inclusion. Where individuality has prevailed, the Spirit calls us to community. Where people are fleeing injustice, be it through a threat to life or through economic oppression, the Spirit of Jesus calls for openness, tolerance, and welcome.

The Holy Spirit is real and present. We can all have that Spirit in our lives, and we can make use of it. The Spirit is not merely promised to others, to the clergy, or super spiritual people. It is promised

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, p. 89.

to all of us, if we open ourselves to it. It has been said that if we have problems or difficulties in our lives, and we aren't sure how to address them, then we bring the best we have to that issue. We study it out in our minds. We talk to friends, to pastors, to parents. Then, having done the best we can, we lay the answer to which we have come before God in prayer. His answer may not be instantaneous, but as we continue to seek God's guidance, the answer will come. We will experience either a sense of peace, or we will continue to feel completely unsettled and confused.

The first experience, that of peace, is God's way, through the Spirit, of telling us that we are headed in the right direction. The other, continued confusion, is his way of saying that we should not act on what we thought was the solution. Instead, we should go back to the drawing board and seek another answer. Friends, from personal experience, I know this really works, and it is the way the Spirit continues to communicate with us today. The Spirit doesn't talk to just special people, but it talks to all of us, if we will let it. I don't know how many times when I have been working on a sermon, an article that I was writing, or just a problem we were facing as a family, that the Spirit has placed an idea in my head, often early in the morning when my mind is quiet, and it was precisely what I needed to hear. That is no accident or coincidence. We think that we will see things clearly when we finally arrive in the presence of God, but we live in his presence now. He is present with us right now in the person of Jesus and the person of the Holy Spirit. We don't have to wait to have our very real, current questions answered. As Jesus so clearly said, "[He] would not leave us without comfort." The Spirit is the foretaste of the age to come when all things will be clear, but it also gives clarity to today, as well.

One person who really knew the Spirit was St. Francis of Assisi. I have read a couple of times now a book entitled *Chasing Francis*. It is about a pastor who has come to a crisis of faith. He has known all the right answers to life's questions. He has built a mega-church from the ground up. He has over 4,000 congregants. But when the four-year-old daughter of a single mother is killed, just days after he had baptized that little girl, all the easy answers go out the window. He comes unglued on a Sunday morning in the pulpit when he admits that he no longer knows all the answers, and you can imagine the reaction he received. Some wanted to fire him on the spot; others wanted to give him a sabbatical, so that he could get his head screwed on straight, which is what happens. As he struggles, he calls his Uncle Kenny who had become a Franciscan Priest—a terrible shock to a family that was staunchly Evangelical.

The pastor, Chase is his name, and thus the name of the book, is invited to come to Italy, which he does, not knowing at all what to expect. His uncle takes him on a pilgrimage, along with other Franciscan friends, to various spots where St. Francis lived and worked. Francis was commanded by Jesus to "build my Church." He took that to mean that he was to rebuild an old, small, dilapidated church that was on the outskirts of Assisi, and so he invited people to contribute one stone, just one stone, to its reconstruction. He would go around and collect the stones, and people would come and help him work on the building. But he soon realized that was not the church the Lord actually had in mind.

The church of St. Francis' day was very corrupt, and many of the higher authorities lived in opulence while the vast majority of the people to which the church was supposed to minister were barely surviving. The Church Francis was to build was Christ's Church on the earth. To that end he became the different person that Paul calls us to be. He gave up everything that he possessed. He gave up family who had tried to imprison him, because they thought he had totally lost it. He lived completely and totally at the beck and call of the Holy Spirit. He spent much time in prayer, and then went where the Spirit led him. It led him to the poor, to the starving, to the ill, to the lepers whom he

would embrace. It led him to everyone that the church of his day was ignoring. The Church was forced, through his example and out of the shame that his life generated, to change, and to become the body of Christ that it is supposed to be.

How much are we willing to risk for Jesus? How willing are we to listen to the call of his Spirit? If we really listen, as did Francis, it will make us uncomfortable with our casual Christianity. We must, in the name of Jesus, get out of the pews and become real disciples of Christ. Luther and Calvin both talked about the priesthood of all believers. Pastors believe in that, but all too often those in the pews don't. So often the question virtually every pastor hears sooner or later is "Don't we pay the pastor to do that stuff for us?" If you recall the Presbyterian Book of Order, Laurie is ordained as a Teaching Elder. That means her job is to prepare members of the congregation for their own unique ministries and calls. Then, if we will let it, the Spirit will lead us each into the ministry to which we are called as we work out our different identities within the Body of the Church. There can be no fence sitters in the Body of Christ. We put our lives on the line for Christ each day of our lives, if we are willing to let the Holy Spirit empower us with that power that comes from the age to come and that seals us to the Lord.

Amen.