

CHOSEN

Ephesians 1:3-14

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 15, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon for today is based on the epistle lesson. It comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 1, verses 3 through 14. It is on page 827 of the pew Bible. In this reading, the Apostle Paul Praises God for what he started before he even created the world. Please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From Ephesians 1, beginning at verse 3, we read in Jesus' name.

³ 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, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Pearl,

You are chosen by God. You are elect. You are adopted by him. You were even predestined. That means that God chose you as his child before he even created the world. Before you were even born, before Jesus was crucified for you, before the fall into sin, and even before he spoke the universe into existence, God chose you as his own. He decided that he would adopt you as his child.

Then, about two thousand years ago, he sent his only Son into the world to live, suffer, die, and rise again for you and for the forgiveness of your sins. And now, as of just a few minutes ago, God adopted you as his own. This decision that he made before the creation of the world has now been made known in time and space. What was known only to God in timeless eternity has come into this world through the waters of your Baptism. And it's marvelous. You are now a child of God. And God saw this, decided this, and delighted in this from eternity past.

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Now I suspect some of that went over your head. That's okay. You probably don't understand any of the words anyone speaks to you. You hear them. You might even like the way they sound, but you have no idea what they mean. But people keep talking to you. And they use real words too, at least most of the time, even though you don't know what the words mean. But they keep using real words. They don't just speak gibberish, even though they could, and you probably wouldn't care.

I think we do this for two reasons—that is we speak real words to babies who can't understand. I can think of two reasons for this. First, because the words are true. Your mom and dad and sisters and several other people too—they tell you that they love you and you are precious to them because it's true. That's the first reason, and it's a very good reason. The second reason is this: eventually you will begin to understand what these words mean. You don't know what they mean now, but eventually you will. Now, if we all just speak gibberish around you and never use real words, you would never learn the meanings of real words. So we actually say things that you don't understand in order to teach you how to understand. You will never come to understand words unless you hear words you don't understand. We all learn by hearing things we don't understand.

Grownups can relate to this too, especially concerning the doctrine of predestination. It's hard for us to understand. It brings up all sorts of questions in our minds. We might understand the meaning of the words when Scripture says, "In love [God the Father] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (1:4). We can understand the plain meaning of the words, but it brings up all sorts of questions about this, that, and the other thing, and we can't make sense of the whole thing. As soon as we start to consider the implications, it gets confusing and it sails over our heads.

And I suppose God knew some of it would sail over our heads. I mean, if he predestined us, he also knew what we would understand and what we would stumble over. But he told us about predestination anyway. And I suppose he spoke this to us because, one, it's true, and, second, as we hear it and struggle with its meaning, we might actually begin to understand it, or at least part of it. We all learn by wrestling with things we don't understand.

So maybe you've never heard of predestination before. Or maybe you have heard of it, but it just ties your brain in knots. That can happen. So maybe you don't want to talk about it. Maybe you don't want a sermon on it. But it's part of the biblical teaching, and that means it deserves our attention. It is something that our heavenly Father spoke to us, first, because it's true, and, second, because he wants us to understand it. So we pay attention like babies trying to understand the speech coming out of their parent's mouth, and, bit by bit, as we listen to our Father's words, we begin to understand and love what he says to us.

So what is predestination? The word that we use more often as Lutherans is "election." It simply means "choosing." God chose us. We did not choose him, but he chose us (John 15:16). And it's not simply that God chose us, but that he chose us before we existed. He chose us before the world even existed. And this is actually one of the acts of God that causes our salvation. That's the doctrine of election or predestination. God chose us as his children before he created the world.

Now the big question that arises when we hear this—the thing that makes us stop and say, "Wait a minute," is the question of those who are not saved. If God chose certain people to be saved, that must also mean that he chose certain people to be damned. It must mean that

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everyone who ends up in hell ends up there because God decided they should go there before he even created them. It sounds kind of arbitrary, but that's the logical conclusion. Choosing certain people must mean that he doesn't choose other people. But that doesn't sound like God.

So you might object to that idea, because doesn't the Bible also say that God desires for "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4)? And you would be right. The Bible does say that. So it can't be true that God arbitrarily decides that some people will go to heaven and some people will go to hell, because God doesn't want anyone to go to hell. So how do we reconcile this?

We go back to Scripture. In Ephesians 1—one of the primary passages that deals with election—what does it say about those who aren't saved? You know what it says about them? Nothing. And Romans 8(:29-30)—the other primary text on predestination—that also doesn't say anything about those who aren't saved. When God speaks about predestination, he only speaks about it one way, so that's where we stop. The doctrine of predestination isn't about those who end up in hell. The biblical doctrine of predestination only deals with those who are saved, and so we leave it at that.

Later today, as your brain chews on this doctrine, you're going to be tempted to either reject it completely or to apply it both ways. Don't do either. It's a biblical doctrine, so we hold it true, but we don't apply it to the lost, because the Bible doesn't.

So you'll notice there's some logical tension here. And that's where this doctrine of predestination goes over our heads. But we have to live with the tension. And here's the distinction that helps us live with the tension: If I am saved and end up in heaven, it is all on account of what God has done for me in Christ Jesus. And if I am lost and end up in hell, it is all on account of my own sin. That's the point of tension. If I am saved, it's because of God. And if I am damned, it's because of me. If we maintain this distinction, the doctrine of predestination will make a lot more sense. Salvation depends on God's will, and damnation depends on man's will.

This is the Lutheran teaching of election. There are other views too. The most common ones are the Calvinist view and the Arminian view, and I'll briefly outline them, because when we state what we don't believe, sometimes it helps clarify what we do believe.

Our Calvinist friends teach that both outcomes depend on the will of God. So they have double predestination. That's how they reconcile the logical tension. Whether I am saved or damned depends completely on God's will. They teach that God predestines the elect, and we agree with them there, but they also say God predestines the lost for damnation, and we part company with them there.

Our Arminian friends go in the other direction. Both outcomes depend on the will of man. In their system, God really does desire for all people to be saved, and we agree with them there, but they say man is the one who casts the deciding vote, and we part company with them there. So they essentially end up with no predestination, although they wouldn't say that. They would simply say that they define it differently. They would say that God foresees what a person will decide concerning Jesus Christ, and then God predestines them based on the decision he knows they will make. But this basically turns predestination into a meaningless doctrine.

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Our Lutheran understanding is different. We are happy to live with a little bit of tension. We confess the doctrine of predestination where the Bible speaks of it—in the case of those elected for salvation—but we leave it alone in the case of those who do not believe.

So that's the logical tension with predestination, but I don't think that's really why we resist this doctrine. It's not really the logic that bothers us. Every day we do lots of things that aren't logical. Our human nature resists this doctrine because it's an assault on our freedom. We like to think of ourselves as free and autonomous creatures.

So even when we come to grips with the fact that we need someone to save us from our sins, we at least want to be able to say that we had some part in it. We at least want to be able to say that we figured out the problem and made the decision that changed our fate. We want there to be something in us that distinguishes us from all those other people who didn't come to their senses. But there isn't anything different about us. We're not better. We're not smarter. We're not wiser. We're not more humble. We don't have anything to boast about. All of the credit for our salvation goes to God and to God alone. And that means that none of the credit goes to us. This is the offensive part of predestination. It strips us of any cause for boasting.

But there's another side to this. There's another angle to it. If our salvation depends completely on God, then it doesn't depend on us, and we can't screw it up, and that is comforting. And that's really the point of this doctrine. The point is not to get our brain cells tangled up in knots. The point is to comfort us and give us confidence in what God has done.

This isn't just an academic topic. Notice that as Paul teaches this doctrine, he's joyfully praising God: "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" (1:3). He praises God because God has chosen us to be his children.

Now it's important that we don't think of this doctrine by itself. The doctrine of election is connected to a few other doctrines, and we can't separate it out.

First, election is connected to Christ and the redemption we have through his blood (1:7). God chose us *in Christ* (1:4). He didn't simply say, I adopt so-and-so as my child and leave it at that. No; we were adopted "as sons through Jesus Christ" (1:5). This means that the cross is essential—even necessary—for predestination. We still had to be reconciled to God. So the cross is the first historical event that makes us confident of our election. We see the price God paid to adopt us as his children.

And the second historical event that makes us confident of our election is our baptisms. And this is the other doctrine that can't be separated from election. Baptism is the event that takes place in our lives where God's decree comes to us. It comes out of timeless eternity and into time and space as God claims us as his own dear children through Baptism.

Now you might say, "Pastor, I don't see the word 'baptism' in this text." And that's true. It's not stated in those terms, but Paul alludes to it. First we find it in the concept of adoption. We know from John 3 that Baptism is a new birth through water and the Holy Spirit. It's the instrument God uses to make us his children. So any time we talk about being adopted as God's children, we should have Baptism in mind, because Baptism is the ceremony of adoption. It's that moment in time and space where God sets his seal on us and says, "You are mine." It's

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where we receive the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), just as adopted children receive their parents' name as their own.

It's also how we come to be "in Christ." God chose us "in Christ" (1:4), and we are God's children because we are "in Christ." So how did we get to be "in Christ"? Whenever you are in something, there had to be some event by which you got *into* that thing. If you want to be in a swimming pool on a hot day, you have to get into the pool. You don't just automatically appear in the pool. The same is true for Jesus Christ. And Scripture speaks in multiple places of being baptized "into Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). It's the entrance into Christ. So Baptism is how we know we are in Christ. And if we are in Christ, then we are adopted, chosen, and predestined as his beloved children.

So we should never think of predestination as some mysterious decree that God made in eternity past. If we do that we will get tangled up in the question of whether or not we are really predestined, and the doctrine will actually bring anxiety instead of comfort. But when you read Paul's words here, it's clearly intended to be a doctrine of comfort. So instead, we think of election in terms of the cross and our baptisms into Christ. On the cross we see God paying the price for our adoption, and in our Baptisms we see him electing us individually. And, of course, Baptism and the cross are connected because being baptized into Christ specifically means being baptized into his death and resurrection.

So when you want to know if you are predestined. When you want to know if you are chosen and adopted as a child of God, you simply ask this: *Did Jesus die for me? Did Jesus rise again from the dead? And am I baptized into that death and resurrection?* This is how you know who you are. This is how you know your identity as a child of God.

Somewhere mysterious in timeless eternity, before the foundation of the world, God decided concerning you that you should be his child. This mystery was made manifest in time and space when he sent his Son to suffer, die, and rise again from the dead for you. And this election was finally spoken upon you at your Baptism, when God marked you as his own dear child and made you an heir of his eternal kingdom. So we rejoice. "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." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.