

Growing Up in Jesus series ~ A Study of Ephesians

Wk 7: *Baptized People* - (Drawing from Eugene Peterson's *Practice Resurrection*)
Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - May 2, 2021

We ended our sermon last week with the truth that God is on our side. God is not against us. God is present and personally working for our good. God is totally involved in the cosmos and God is seeking us to bless us. We start with the blessing. We are the *blessed-by-God people*. Paul's term of choice for this is "saint."

Paul began his letter by designating all of those who are in his congregation (and all of us in our congregation), without qualification, all of us, regardless of reputation or behavior, all are designated as "saints" in Ephesians 1:1. Saint is, literally, a "holy one." He continues to use the term for us as "saints" nine times in his letter. "Saint" is Paul's noun of choice for the people of God - we men and women who, no longer lost, follow Jesus in the cosmos.

Now today the word "saint" takes on an air of elitism or is only used for outstanding Christians, sort of our "hall of fame" of Christianity. St Francis of Assisi or St Patrick come to mind. We may now be so accustomed to hearing "saint" used as a term of honor that when we hear the word used for us, it may create dissonance. Is Paul naive? How well does he know these people? How well does he know us? Know me?

But Paul does mean what he says. Eugene Peterson says, *Paul does mean for the word to take us by surprise,*

to create dissonance. He means for us to take a second look at these men and women that it would never have occurred for us to name as saints. By identifying these blessed-by-God people - we, of course, get included too.

Paul deliberately chooses a word that identifies us by what God does in and for us, not what we do for God. I'll say that again. Paul deliberately chooses a word that identifies us by what God does in and for us, not what we do for God. He really identifies us as created by God, saved by Jesus, and formed for holiness by the Holy Spirit. Paul is here re-training our imaginations to understand ourselves not in terms of how we feel about ourselves and not in terms of how others treat us, but in terms of how God feels about us and treats us. Not as our parents or our teachers or our physicians or our employers or our children define us, but how God does: *saint*. Not in terms derived from our employment or our education or physical appearance or our achievements or our failures, but how God does: *saint*.

Paul is not deterred by how we think of ourselves. He's saying, *"Pay attention to what I am saying. I want to give you a new word for yourself, a word that gets beneath all appearances, behind all rules and functions, a word that defines you primarily in terms of who God is for you and what God is doing in your life, a person who is growing up in Christ, a person who cannot be accurately identified apart from God's intense and persistent attention: saint."* And so we do pay attention. Saint. Holy. Us.

This involves a radical shift in perception both of ourselves and of others. We grow up in a society that evaluates us by appearance and role, by behavior and potential. We are endlessly tested, examined, classified, praised, damned, admired, despised, flattered, scorned, kissed, kicked... as what?: *thoroughly ungodly, secular things*. But it's not true, we are *saints*.

If we take God's blessing and the seven verbs from chapter one: there are seven verbs in the long sentence of Ephesians 1:3-14. These are seven verbs of God's doing: *Blessed...chosen...destined...bestowed...lavished...made known...gathered up...* these orient us to the central action of the cosmos that is in us and for us. God for us.

If we forget that we are saints: loved and chosen, blessed and called together, forget that and how can we hope to understand the world we live in and understand what living in this world involves for us? We can't. With all the voices coming at us from every direction and at all hours, how do we acquire a God-oriented identity? If everyone addresses, promises, commands, and rewards us in terms that are indifferent to who we are: loved and chosen, blessed and called together, all God's action for us, then we will miss who we really are and be simply lost in the cosmos. But you are cosmic. You are the treasure bringing about the central actions of the cosmos.

Looking in the mirror and naming what we see as “saint” is one way to combat the voices coming at us that assume we are lost in the cosmos. We follow naming ourselves as “saint” by redefining the people around us as saints too. It’s a start. And it is where Paul starts. He names us *saints* – not because we did something saintly, but because he sees God in us, sees us as truly and always in the company of the Holy Trinity: holy men, holy women, holy children, holy, holy, holy.

In our identity-confused society, too many of us have settled for a compiled identity composed of Social Security number, medical records, academic degrees, job history, and whatever fragments of genealogy we can salvage. You are a wonderful composition, but Christians can also do better: we are baptized, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By virtue of that name, we are saints.

Paul does not name us saints because of our spiritual heroics or our superb morality. He has been around Christians for a few years and he knows us pretty well. And he knows himself. He has no pietistic illusions about the Ephesian church saints or himself. It had been several years since he was their pastor, so he probably only knew a few of them by name. He does say he knows a little, **“I’ve heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers”** (Ephesians 1:15-16). But this is hearsay knowledge. He has heard. How can

he be serious then in designating them as *saints* - holy people?

Here's how: holy does not refer to them as they are in themselves; it refers to who they are in God. Paul is not particularly interested in them psychologically, nor does their moral behavior top the list of what makes them who they are either. It is God's intent for them and God's action for and in them that defines them. They are cosmic. It is not what they think of themselves, or how well they are doing in life, or how good they are that defines them. God with those seven verbs! - is definitive about who they are: *Blessed...chosen...destined...bestowed...lavished...made known...gathered up...* Paul knows this and he is not going to let them forget it.

One of the ways that Paul reinforces this new way for Christ's followers to understand themselves is by calling them *saints*. "Holy" is not who they are on their own, but who God is in and for them. Again, "holy" is not what they do, but what God does in them. And get this, all this holiness and saintliness understands them primarily and comprehensively in relation to the way God treats them, not the way they treat God. God says you are "holy".

Why? Why set us apart as holy? He sets us apart to follow the assignments He gives us. He's called us. You have a calling. Even if you don't know what it is, God is moving it forward, He has set you apart from the ways of the world in order put you in position to follow the

assignment He gives you. Even if we don't currently know what that assignment is He is still faithful to be using you for His good purpose. How often have we learned something in one season of life only to find it becomes useful in a completely different season? You are set apart, holy, and God is accomplishing His good purposes for you.

The most important thing then about any one of us is not what we do but what God does, not what we do for God but what God does for us. It is because we know what God does in and for us that we are no longer lost in the cosmos. So we practice resurrection. The after-Easter resurrection world is where we live and it is entered when we follow Jesus and come up from the waters of baptism. Yes, baptism.

Baptism defines a person comprehensively as a new creation, new creation and ongoing creation, of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, a person totally immersed in all the operations of the Trinity. Baptism marks a radically new way to understand ourselves and one another: not by race, not by language, not by parents and family, not by politics, not by intelligence, not by gender, not by behavior. All of these various ways of accounting for selves are significant, but none is definitive. Holy baptism defines us as holy, as saints. Baptism is definitive.

How do we then maintain our baptized identity? By keeping company with people who have firsthand

knowledge of who we are: men and women *blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, gathered up* - by God!

Eugene Peterson says, *These same people embarrass us with their haphazardness, exhilarate us with their joy, offend us by their inconsistent lives, comfort us with their compassion, criticize us, encourage and bring the best out of us, bore us with their blandness, stimulate us with their enthusiasm.* But we didn't choose them. God chooses them. We keep company with them: men and women God chooses. These saints.

And then we get on with living. Ephesians 2:8-10 says, **For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

A good natured and wise friend of mine often says in regard to the Christian life, *"Just live your life."* There's a treasure of Jesus *"gathered up"* and *"made known"* in that statement. I think it means, rather than second guess ourselves all the time on what those good works God has for us to do are, it means *"Enjoy your life. Don't miss that God gave you your life to enjoy. He'll accomplish His good purpose, it's His promise."* If you're inclined to second-guess whether you're doing God's will for your life, make that secondary to enjoying your life in the cosmos God.

God gave you life to enjoy, not so you would sit around wondering what God has for you. You are a saint. Enjoy. You are cosmic: the central actions of the cosmos are at work in you baptized in Jesus. Enjoy life!

The Apostle Paul says it this way, “**created...for good works,**” and the good works are “**to be our way of life.**” Be encouraged, if you’re second guessing, you WILL do those good works, because you were created for them. Be encouraged, you ARE a saint, not by those good works, but because what God has done and is doing in you.

As Cardinal Newman said and I quoted this a couple weeks ago, *we may never know all the good God has for us, all the purpose he created us for, but we can know that God does and is making it happen.* Now let’s get on living and enjoying our lives.

Paul’s message is a breath of fresh air for any weary saint. No longer lost in the cosmos, we are part of God’s plan. No longer lost in the cosmos, God is on our side doing a good work in us. Enjoy!