



# *The Westminster Pulpit*

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church  
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

## ***“Glorious Grace”*** **Sermon on Ephesians 1:3-14**

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Have you ever felt that you just can't keep from singing? That your soul just needs to express itself? I heard a wood thrush trilling the other day, like Jane Kirchner on her flute, and I wanted to sing like that wood thrush, without anything holding me back: singing out thanks for all the gifts of life! For God's abundant blessings! For God's steadfast love which holds me fast come what may, for God's mercies fresh every morning! How can we keep from singing?

That is the way the writer of the letter to the Ephesians felt, singing out his hymn of rejoicing in our passage for today. This believer likely shaped by the good news of the gospel received through the teachings and ministry of Paul, was writing now after Paul's cruel death at the hands of the Romans. Enmity existed between Jews and Gentiles, races, ethnicities, faiths, and classes, division reigned, and the Romans used the tools of division and oppression, violence and death to maintain control. There were many reasons for those called to follow Christ to keep their heads down, to despair, to go silent, rather than sing.

And yet, the opening of this letter is a song of praise and thanksgiving lifting up glory to God! Amidst a time of challenge, turmoil, and uncertainty, this early Christian writer calls forth a hymn of joy and blessing to plant the fledgling churches firmly in the glorious grace of God in Christ. Was this early believer simply an optimist, a glass half-full person, or a person so convicted that God's redeeming love was ever at work amidst the world's suffering bringing hope that his spirit just had to sing?

Grateful for the incredible soloists and chamber choir leading us in worship at 8:30, many of us have been blown away by the size of the Westminster choir at the 11:00 service, normally a smaller “pick up” choir in the summer. I mentioned this to some choir members, and you know what they said? After all the months of isolation we could not stay away, our spirits, our bodies, have to sing and worship in community! May I hear an “Amen” for all our choral singers! Amen!

As we turn to this scripture song, you may want to follow along as it is read, or you may want to try sitting with open hands and closed eyes. Feel the rich overflow of praise and gratitude in this letter's hymn – like an awe-inspiring waterfall cascading over you – experience this doxology of thanksgiving and joy, love and grace.

From the letter to the Ephesians, the first chapter, verses 3-14. Hear the Word of God! / Our ears are open.

### *Ephesians 1:3-14*

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, <sup>4</sup> just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup> He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup> In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup> so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup> In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; <sup>14</sup> this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

The Word of the Lord./ Thanks be to God!

This doxology of praise tumbles forth!

Blessed be God – who has blessed us - every spiritual blessing is ours – we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world – held in love, holy, blameless – destined for adoption as God's beloved children in Christ – forgiven, redeemed – all according to God's good pleasure and good will – glorious grace is lavished upon us, freely bestowed – granting us hope, an inheritance in Christ, promising a plan for the fullness of time to gather all things in him! God has a plan, and we are in it! This awe-inspiring waterfall of a hymn, an ode to joy of life in God, just takes my breath away! In the midst of the harsh realities, threats, anxieties and divisions of his day, the writer of Ephesians starts here, with superlatives, words of blessing, praise, grace and hope! He starts with a symphony of ways to say, "Thank you, God!" And you know, it is a pretty good song for us, too, with all we have been through. We might have missed it, but we, too, have been blessed.

The mystic late 13<sup>th</sup> century theologian Meister Eckhart wrote, "If the only prayer you say in your entire life is 'Thank You,' that would suffice." Why? Because it affirms that all we have and all we are is a gift from God; we are never alone, we are God's chosen children, beloved, accepted, embraced in love and grace all the days of our lives and beyond life itself; and we live with God in community for we were made for relationship. Wherever we are, God is with us. Not a single one of us is self-made. "It is

the God-relationship that makes us human” – wrote the 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian Soren Kierkegaard. According to the riches of Christ’s grace lavished upon us, we are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, living as heirs of Christ’s inheritance, in the mystery of God’s grace. Always.

In a hard journey with cancer, the sister of a friend kept in front of her these words: “The mystery that created me will sustain me.” Following her memorial service, a saxophonist played a love song; for the mystery that created her in love, for love, would never cease providing sustenance in love – to her, and to all who mourned. Those long sweet, sustained notes of the saxophone sang the truth - in God’s love we abide.

When Jan, my stepmother, started falling to the floor as ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease progressed, she would tell me, “I don’t panic, I lie there and see what everything looks like from that vantage point, giving God thanks for another day of living.” In the morning, before seeking my dad’s help to get out of bed, she would narrate to God all the things she was thankful for. Certainly, there were times when she gave voice to the painful effects of this disease, she shared her full truth, AND, she claimed her narrative for her journey through. Her tunes of anguish and thanksgiving eventually became a hymn of peace. And in the mystery of God’s grace, on Easter morning, Jan was received into the eternal embrace of God.

A man shared with me last week, “I was hurt by the church for not accepting me for who I am, but I have always felt the reality of God’s love. That has never left me.” Friends, individually and as the church, do we mirror the face of God known to us in Jesus? Jesus called those outside the circle of community inside where love heals. He called disciples then, and calls us now, as we hear in Matthew 25, to see his face in the hungry and feed them, to see his body in the naked and clothe them, to know him in the thirsty and provide clean water, to see him in the sick and the outcast and care for them, to find him in those in prison and visit them. Some of Luther’s best words were these: “As our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought to freely help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians....”

As Christians, becoming the hands, feet and eyes of Christ, mercy replaces judgment, inclusion trumps exclusion, and hope for the fulfillment of God’s gathering in of all people and creation becomes our lived affirmation of faith. We are a Matthew 25 congregation of Easter people! Last week during the Minute for Mission, Margie asked a question of Cat Folk, Mia Dunlap, and Jessica Long, three of the junior high hometown mission week participants: How did you see love in action? At Strick’s Gift, and Room In The Inn, at People Loving Nashville and at the farms, at Open Table Nashville and United4Hope – we saw God, they said, love in action, everywhere we went!

With a song of thanksgiving in our hearts, firmly grounded in our identity as God’s beloved children, we can see and be God’s love in action with Christ. When we know how much God has graced us, we participate in God’s will for the world – just like our youth!

With gratitude for all God’s blessings to us even in a pandemic, we gave thanks at Westminster’s annual congregational meeting on Zoom in February for actually

having a budget surplus – but we didn't stop there! We celebrated our call not to hold on to what we have, but to give it away, knowing that the church is called to self-sacrifice, as we follow our servant Lord. Let's give thanks for the Westminster Session's Spirit-led June decision to provide up to \$450,000 in assistance to our mission partner agencies in Nashville doing work that addresses the needs of people negatively affected by the pandemic. Where is there crying need from the pandemic? That is where we see the face of Christ embodied in suffering people, calling us to come alongside, to respond with compassion, sharing the suffering, becoming part of God's plan for gathering all people in to the circle of God's love and grace, where there is enough to go around, and all are included at Christ's open table.

The fact that we have enough to share, that we can see Christ's face everywhere we turn is no accident. Every Sunday we sing the doxology, we begin our service with praise and adoration, we close with thanksgiving, we listen for God's Word, we respond to God's Word, we lift up to God the realities of our lives, and we are sent out into the world to be God's healing instruments of love, giving ourselves in love like Jesus without holding back. As the writer of First John said, "We love, because God first loved us." (1 John 4:19) We live in steadfast love and glorious grace – not because we earned it, but because of who God is! Thanks be to God for this good news! Tune our hearts, O God, to sing thy grace! Amen.

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