

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
May 9, 2010

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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Ephesians 1:3-14

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 . . . (Ephesians 3:3 N.R.S.V.)

Thus Far Have We Come

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

I found this on the internet the other day. And I thought it was worth sharing.

I am hereby officially tendering my resignation as an adult. I have decided I would like to accept the responsibilities of a 5-year-old again.

-I want to go to McDonald's and think that it is a four-star restaurant.

-I want to sail sticks across a fresh mud puddle and make ripples in a pond with rocks.

-I want to think M & M's are better than money because you can eat them.

-I want to lie under a big oak tree and watch the ants march up its trunk.

-I want to run a lemonade stand with my friends on a hot summer's day.

-I want to go fishing and care more about catching the minnows along the shore than the big bass in the lake.

-I want to think the world is fair.

-I want to return to a time when life was simple. When all I knew about were colors, multiplication tables and nursery rhymes. When I didn't know what I know now. When all I knew was to be happy because I was blissfully unaware of all the things that should make me worried.

-I want to think that a quarter is worth more than a dollar bill because it is prettier and weighs more.

-I want to think that everyone is honest and good. I want to believe that anything is possible.

-I want to be oblivious to the complexities of life and be overly excited by the little things in life again.

-I want to believe in the power of smiles, hugs, a kind word, truth, dreams, the imagination, the tooth fairy, a kiss that makes a boo-boo go away, making angels in the snow, and that my dad is the strongest person in the world.

So, here are my checkbook and my car keys, my credit cards and the bills, my 401K statements, my stocks and bonds, my collections, my insurance premiums, my job, my house and the payments, my e-mail address, pager, cell phone, computer and watch. I am officially resigning from adulthood. And if you want to discuss this with me further, you'll have to catch me 'cause, tag! You're it!

-author unknown

Today we are celebrating Casey's and Amanda's successful completion of high school. In a few days you will be graduating, you will be going on to college, you will be moving into the adult world. Over the next few years you will be gaining more and more individual freedom. You will also be gaining more and more responsibilities.

So this is an exciting time. It is a time to celebrate your successes. You have already faced some major problems in your life, and you have done well. You are ready for this next step.

Still if you are like most of us, this graduation has some mixed emotions. I doubt that you want to go back to being 5-year-olds, but the chances are good you have some anxiety about the future. So I want to remind you of the special advantages that are yours as Christians. For you do not go alone into the future, Christ goes with you.

In our text from Ephesians, Paul writes that as Christians, God has given us every spiritual blessing, then Paul goes on to detail what that means for us. Now I want to remind you that Paul was writing this letter while he was in prison. It is easy to maintain a good attitude when everything is going well for you. But what Paul reminds us here is that even in difficulty, even in failure, even when the whole world seems to be against you, still you are blessed. For Christ is beside you.

Paul lists three sources of strength for Christians. We are chosen by Christ. We are redeemed in his blood. And we have received a great inheritance in him. Let's take these one at a time.

Paul writes, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us . . ."

Can you remember a time when teams were being picked and you were among the last ones picked? It is an awful feeling. If that hasn't happened to you yet, it will. I know one fellow who always did good in both sports and school. But when he entered the job market, he found that he

was not on the top of anyone's list. That was really hard for him to deal with, because he had never had that experience before. But here is Paul's point, you were part of God's plan even before the world was created. It was always God's plan to have you on his team. You are always first string players with God. You are always loved and valued and wanted on God's team.

When Paul wrote this letter he was in a tight fix. All the authorities and earthly powers seemed to be against him. He was in prison and would likely die there. But Paul never forgot that he was still on God's team. And if God is for us, it doesn't really matter who is against us.

Paul continues in verse 7, "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us."

Listen, everybody fails from time to time, and everybody makes mistakes. But the difference between winners and losers in life, is that the winners don't let their failures and mistakes define who they are. Some people insist on dragging their past failures with them everywhere they go, and then complain that nothing ever goes right for them.

As Christians we have a special advantage in this department. Christ forgives us our sins and gives us fresh starts. In Christ we get "do-overs." Paul knows what he is talking about. Before his conversion, Paul persecuted Christians. He was responsible for many of the early Christian deaths. He is all too aware that he has blown his chance. That he is not worthy to be accepted as one of Christ's own.

Yet, in grace, Christ did forgive Paul and used him extremely powerful ways. You too will experience failures and mistakes. And you will have to suffer certain consequences as a result. But those failures and mistakes do not have to become your identity. Your identity is safe in Christ. Christians get to leave their failure behind. Christians get "do-overs." What a wondrous gift is that!

I think about Chuck Colson. He had an important position in the Nixon Administration. Then came the Watergate scandal and he was sent to prison as a consequence of his wrong doing. He had to serve out his term in prison and he did. But he did not allow that to become his identity. Today Chuck Colson is not known as a law breaker, a criminal, or an ex-con. He is known as the founder of one of the most powerful and successful prison ministries going to date.

Paul continues in verse 11 with his third advantage for Christians: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, . . .that we might live to the praise of his glory."

Now a lot of people read this as saying that in Christ we get to go to heaven someday. But that isn't what Paul is talking about here. The inheritance is not something we will receive in the future, it is already ours. In Christ we have received an inheritance, it is already ours.

The inheritance is our purpose in living. Our purpose is to serve God and to enjoy God forever. That's right we not only serve God but we enjoy working with God.

Amanda and Casey, you will find that as you go through life, there are lots of different things and people who will be in competition for your time, your energy, and most of all for your heart. The world wants you for selfish purposes, be careful, for what the world offers is not satisfying, it is merely fool's gold. (It is simply not true that the one who dies with the most toys wins.)

We were made to be part of a much larger purpose than ourselves. And only when we are caught up in the purposes of God, will we find our true purpose and destiny. Paul knew that because he had experienced it in his own life. He was facing death in prison, but he didn't let that slow him down, because he was caught up in the purposes of God.

Here is a more modern example of this same kind of liberating, joyful, Christian thinking. This is from the final journal entry of an unknown Zimbabwean pastor, who was martyred for his faith.

“I am a disciple of Christ. I will not let up look back or slow down. My past is redeemed, my future secure. I am done with low living, small planning, smooth knees, mundane talking and small goals. My fate is set; my goal is sure! My road is narrow and rough. I am a disciple of Christ. I must go until he comes, speaking of all I know of him and work until he stops me.”
(Homiletics 1/4/2009)

Of course as soon as I bring in the bit about following God's purpose for your life, someone is sure to ask, “How do I know when I am following God's purpose for my life?” That is a whole sermon in and of itself. But let me give you the short version. Be diligent in prayer and watch for the opportunities that God sends you to join him in his work. Also take note of where God has guided you in the past and build on that foundation. God has been working in the world long before you were born and he has been working in your life all along. Look at what has happened in your life and be open to how God may use that in the future.

In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet and judge, Samuel sets up a stone monument or altar at the site of a great victory that God gave the Israelites over the Philistines. He calls the stone, “Ebenezer” which loosely translated means “stone of help.” The idea is that every time any of the Israelites pass by this stone they will be reminded of the way that God has helped them in the past, and thus, have new hope and strength for the future.

You will notice Casey and Amanda, that as you go through life, there will be times when God seems very close to you, when God gives you a great victory, when you know that you are in line with God's will. Think of those as an imaginary line of stone “Ebenezers,” stone markers. There will also be times when God will seem very far away and you will not be sure which way to go. When you get to those uncertain times, look back at the line of stone markers, Ebenezers, behind you. You will notice that they are all leading in a particular direction. Then keep going in that general direction until you hear a clear word of God to change.

You might notice that in our next hymn,

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” verse 2 begins,

*“Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by Thy help I’m come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.”*

Amanda and Casey, you might think of your graduation from High School as one of those imaginary Ebenezers. Thus far have you come by God’s help. Trusting in God’s help, he will lead you all through your life, and safely home at last.

Amen.