A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*The Living Temple of God*”

Ephesians 1:15-23

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There are two letters in the New Testament in which the Apostle Paul lovingly praises a church for who they are in Christ and the way they have lived that out, affirming their identity and encouraging them in their Christian witness. Philippians is one of them, really the whole letter is a kind of love letter to that church. The other is Ephesians, which is a love letter like Philippians, while also grounding Paul’s love for the church and God’s love for us all in the real world—the real stuff that we deal with.

The passage we read today from Chapter 1 of Ephesians is given by the lectionary to be read on Ascension Sunday, which makes sense as it speaks of Christ’s exaltation seated in the heavenly places, far above everything else down here. Christ was raised from the dead, and then ascended to heaven where he rules all in all. In fact, this passage is read on every Ascension Sunday, as well as Christ the King Sunday and All Saints Day. In other words, this is the fine china of lectionary texts. You take it out for the best holidays.

It’s definitely the bone china gravy boat of blessings! “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you.”

What a good word to say: “I do not cease to give thanks for you.” What a good word to hear: “I remember you in my prayers.” I hope you can hear that word for you. That you are remembered with thankfulness. That you are prayed for. That you are held in the arms of God whose wisdom is yours, whose revelation is yours, by whom the eyes of your heart are opened to divine love, human joy and human pain, and in whom you have the path to abundant life.

For those who are feeling it today, this is a blessing of delight and affirmation. Someone you know is relishing this kind of blessing as praise for the source of all good things. God is good, so very good, that to think of Jesus far above all rule and authority and power and dominion is joyful assurance that Christ still reigns and all shall be well.

For those who are anything but feeling it in their lives right now, it’s at least a message of assurance to hold on to: you are not forgotten; you are not abandoned; you are not alone. You are the beloved. You are gifted. You have hope. Someone you know isn’t so sure of that. Christ ascendant far above everything means mostly that Christ isn’t here, or at least not here in any tangible sense. It sounds pretty thin if it’s just a vague notion of love, a generic idea of hope, a mushy idea of wisdom, revelation, and wholeheartedness, but not thick where we really need it in our relationships, our work, our bodies—all those places where life is lived with its joys and its pains. Today’s blessing would be too good to be true in any real sense of the word, if it weren’t for the cross and resurrection.

Eventually, for all of us, those places are where we need all the things in this blessing. The real places are where we need wisdom, revelation, enlightened hearts and hope. By real places, what we really mean are the broken places. Where we’re hurting is where we need Christ the very most. And what we get instead is Christ ascending, away from us just exactly when we need him to be closer.

With the disciples we look up as he ascends, and maybe with more than one of them we think, “Hey, wait a minute. I need you here, not up there above all rule and authority in the heavenly places. I’m glad you’re going to the right hand of the father, but I need you here at my right hand. I need you at my left hand. I need you in my head and in my heart and in my thinking and my speaking and my feeling and in my grief. I need you here in my appetites and temptations and my goings and my comings. And my discerning and my big decisions that I can’t make all alone. I need you here, not out there, not up there. I need you here. If you won’t be here then just let me get on out of here and go up there with you.”

And that’s actually what Christianity becomes for a lot of people. It becomes a lot of longing to be with Christ up there--somewhere. When Christianity is reduced down for a lot of people that’s what it’s all about: waiting until the day when we’re taken out of this place until we can be up there with him. Until then, it’s just waiting for that day to come.

I don’t think that’s what Christ had in mind even with the ascension. A religion that is just about what is up there, out there, and about leaving these bodies, transcending these lives, escaping them to something higher and better isn’t really called Christianity. It’s called Gnosticism. At least it used to be, way back when, back when Ephesians was being written. In fact, a lot of the language intentionally used in the Ephesian blessing is language that people leaning toward Gnosticism would have recognized and loved.

*Wisdom*—they loved the idea of discovering a secret knowledge impenetrable to ordinary mortals. *Revelation*—they loved that too; that they had a special knowledge only available to them and no one else. *Enlightened hearts*—that one especially --that they were in the light, enlightened in a way only a few could possess, discovering the secret light hidden in dark places. All the language used in the blessing is intentionally taking hold of words that these other folks used and traded in and then turning it into a blessing.

There’s enough in common with Christianity and the Gnostics that it can be hard to recognize the subtle differences between what they each meant by wisdom, revelation, and light, but the differences really aren’t that subtle in the end. Gnosticism was about spiritual life only and thought that anything in this world was evil and to be left behind as soon as you could do it. You can imagine how gnostic-type folks would have loved the Ascension of Jesus story; it affirmed everything they thought Christianity should be about—leaving behind the earth. If you’re good enough, one day you’ll just float on up out of here too.

It’s like these Ephesian Gnostic-Christian folks had gotten enough of Christianity in their heads to be inspired to love Jesus, but not enough to appreciate what that would mean for their lives on earth. They had a doctrine of Christ as the fullness of God, but not a doctrine of Christ as the fullness of man. Whereas Christianity asserts Christ is both the fullness of God and the fullness of man and that our lives, lived in Christ bring us closer to God not by escaping these lives and bodies, but by being fully who God created us to be in and through them.

The gnostic-type folks in Ephesus are kind of floating around in the air like balloons in their Christian-like faith. So, the Ephesian writer tenderly reaches up and takes hold the string tied to the floating Ephesian Gnostic-Christian spiritualized balloon and gently pulls it back down to earth in the form of a blessing. The blessing takes the language they love: wisdom, knowledge, enlightenment and the story they love: Christ raised from the dead, ascended, and sitting at the right hand of the father, and pulls it all right back down to earth by reconnecting—by tying our faith in the ascendant Christ and his spiritual gifts with the church. The highest holiest theological affirmations are bound inextricably with the bodies, relationships, challenges, and blessings right in front of you in this life.

“God has put all things under Christ’s feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” You can hardly find more exalted language to describe the church: the church as The Body of the ascendant Christ, the church as The Fullness of Christ who fills all in all.

The blessings come from heaven because Christ has ascended to heaven and he has in a way taken us with him into heaven, but we are to live the heavenly life in the earthly realm to which Jesus came. We are to embody the qualities of heaven here on earth by living in authentic relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, giving witness to the presence of Christ who, by the Holy Spirit, is dwelling in our midst. Christian faith is not simply one of hope in the great by and by, nor is it disdain for our humanness and the things of earth. Ephesians goes about as far the other direction as you can imagine: human relationships are almost as integral to the divine as the divine is to the human. (Jack Haberer, “Ephesians 1:15-23”, Interpretation, July 2008.)

Christ may be far above all things, seated at the right hand of the father, above all principalities and powers, but Christ is also in all things, all in all, and the fullness of that immanent divine presence is us--the church. That’s right, you and me and all of us. You are the body of Christ. You are the fullness of Christ on earth. How does that sit with you?

You can seek out a church to pray alone—a sanctuary or chapel where you’re all by yourself; you can be an introvert and prefer to be left alone, but you should never feel all alone in church. You are no longer strangers and aliens, you are fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Built on Christ Jesus the cornerstone, you are a new building made of living stones, joined together, one to another. You are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. You are the living temple of God.

We remember that at DaySpring in a roundabout way. We are a church in the contemplative tradition which means we try to remember in everything we do that God is near and can be known directly and personally in love. A contemplative is one who seeks to dwell in God’s presence, like Hannah, Samuel’s mother, who prayed silently in the temple, like Simeon and Anna waiting for the promised messiah, like the early church who shared meals together and prayed in the temple daily. The root of contemplative is temple--we know that to be contemplative is to dwell in the temple of God. What we must also remember is that we *are* the temple of God. God’s temple on earth is made from human lives brought together tongue and groove style, fit together like shiplap or whatever, built on Christ our foundation stone. We share this identity with all Christians everywhere: knit together into something beautiful, something mystical, something bigger and better and richer and fuller than any of us could be alone. To be contemplative is to be *entempled*. To be *entempled* is to be church with one another and for one another, making space for one another to be all God created you to be.

This is a lofty vision. If you want to point out that church in reality seems like a long, long way from the exaltation of the Ephesian vision, then you’re probably spot on, but let this then be an encouragement to us. Love someone today. Let your life in some way big or small be knitted to someone else’s. Let your life stand on the strength of someone who has gone before you and be a strong foundation for someone who comes after you. Give thanks for someone. Remember someone in your prayers. See this house of God as a beautiful, amazing place with nooks and crannies you haven’t begun to explore. See the table we share as a feast with food for all. See the lives we live as holding one another in our joys and sorrows, our successes and failures, our wholeheartedness and our brokenness.

The action of Christianity isn’t just up there way beyond all things with Christ in the heavenly places. The action is happening right here in the body of Christ, in the people all around you, and in our brothers and sisters secretly meeting quietly today lest they be discovered by the principalities and powers. And by new believers, by those barely holding on to their faith, and by those coming back home. The holy, spiritual action is also here, the divine electricity flowing between us, every time the bread is broken and God’s people come to the table, strengthened in the mysterious, spiritual unity of God’s holy church.

That’s the Ephesian blessing, now let us hear the Ephesian prayer that the vision be made real in us:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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