

Ephesians 1:1-14
To the Praise of His Glory

Michelle Porco
July 14, 2019

Riverdale Baptist Church
Whitehorse, Yukon

This past Advent, we worked our way through the prologue in John's gospel as we focused on the central verse: *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Then again at Easter time, and in the weeks following resurrection Sunday, we explored the theme of glory. We considered the glory of the cross and the glory of the resurrection, as we looked at themes of temple, Passover, and creation. During those weeks, we reconsidered how we understand salvation, Jesus' death and resurrection, and all that we read in the Bible.

It is perhaps human nature to conclude that Jesus' death and resurrection are primarily about us, about our relationship to God, about our being reconciled to God, about our being forgiven from our sins and saved so we can have eternal life. It is perhaps human nature to conclude that our salvation is for our benefit, that salvation is for the purpose of me: so I can live forever in some mysterious far-off place called heaven. It is perhaps human nature to conclude that many of the stories of the Bible teach us about ourselves – about human sin and human character. We considered the Old Testament story of the exodus – when Israel was freed from Egypt. We typically think it is a story about God's rescuing Israel from bondage and slavery and oppression. We explain it as a story about God's relationship with his people. Yet I suggested to you that the main point of the story was not the freedom from oppression and slavery and bondage, but the main point of the story is about God's glory. The book of Exodus ends with the building of the Tabernacle and the glory of God filling the tabernacle. The exodus happened so God could reveal his glory. This is the focus of the story – God's glory, not human freedom.

But it is human nature to put ourselves at the centre of any story, to make ourselves into the focus of the story. And so during the spring, we've been considering whether Jesus' death and resurrection is first and foremost about you and me, we've been considering whether salvation is first about the forgiveness of our sins and our living eternally in heaven, we've been considering whether the stories of the Bible are first about us. Most definitely Christian salvation includes the forgiveness of our sins but is that the main point?

This is not easy work. After all, for my entire life – born and raised in a Christian home and church – I have heard the message that Jesus died for me, that Jesus died to forgive me, that Jesus died to set me free, that Jesus died for my salvation. I cannot escape the primary message that Jesus' death and resurrection are all about me. It's about me in relationship to God, but still about me. And when I hear that message over and over again, I'm inclined to read the Bible and listen to the stories of the Bible with an ear of what does this tell me about me, what nugget of truth can I learn about me, what does this tell me about what God does for me.

I have been suggesting to you this spring that the primary reason for Jesus' death and resurrection is not because of me. To be sure, Jesus most certainly did die for the forgiveness of my sins, for the healing of my wounds, to bring God's Kingdom from heaven to earth, so that I can be reconciled to God. But that wasn't His first and primary task in life, nor in death.

His first and primary task was to glorify God. All that Jesus said and did were for glory: to reveal the essence of who God is. Jesus' death and resurrection were first about glory: to manifest the

divine nature of the eternal God. Jesus' birth and death, his baptism, resurrection and ascension and all that happened in between, were first about glory; not me or you; but about God. Then after Jesus ascended into heaven, we get to the day of Pentecost. And on Pentecost Sunday, we were reminded that it is a day where we celebrate the fulfillment of God's promise. Pentecost is where we celebrate that the Holy Spirit dwells in us. Pentecost marks the day that God's glory is no longer revealed in a temple, no longer revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, but God's glory is now revealed in and through us because of the Holy Spirit.

This summer, I'd like us to continue along this same theme of glory. And I would like us to frame our conversation in the context of church and Christian discipleship. Christian formation and discipleship, or becoming mature in Christ, is a current focus of our church. The book of Ephesians brings these themes together – God, glory, Christian formation, and church. So throughout the summer and likely into the fall, we will be studying this book.

In the first verse of this book, Paul the apostle gives us a very important clue into how Christian formation happens, into the context of how we grow in Christian maturity and discipleship. Paul addresses his letter "*to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus*". The saints here refers to the church, to the community of faithful disciples, to the gathered believers. This is not a letter written to Timothy or to Priscilla, Christian men and women who were leaders in their churches. He is not writing to an individual. When Paul writes a letter about Christian formation and maturity, he writes a letter to the church. Why? Because Paul the apostle understands that the

context for growing in Christian maturity, the context for Christian discipleship, the context for Christian formation is the church.

Why is the church, the gathered community of Christian disciples, the community of faithful followers of Jesus, the space in which Christian maturity and formation happens? After all, each of us have our own disappointments and appreciation of the church. There is a strange mix of frustration, love, loyalty, agony, belonging, and hurt all connected with our experience of church. Both those who find themselves at home in the church and those who are strangers to church have this odd mix of thoughts and feelings towards church.

So if the church is a source of pain and pleasure, of betrayal and belonging, of agony and appreciation, why is the church also the primary place for Christian maturity and growth to take place? Why can't I simply grow in Christian formation as I worship at home listening to sermons and singing along with Christian songs on youtube or tv? Why can't I grow in my Christian faith in the privacy of my home with a few other people I like and get along with as we study God's Word and pray? Why can't I grow in my Christian faith as I climb mountains or paddle down rivers and feel the powerful presence of God in the midst of his beautiful and bountiful creation?

Because of Pentecost. At Pentecost, God sent His Holy Spirit to his church, to us. The Holy Spirit formed the church and the Holy Spirit is where God's glory dwells. And if the Holy Spirit dwells in the church, among his people, then of course God's people will grow in Christian formation in the context of His church because that is where His Spirit dwells.

The letter to the Ephesians is unique among Paul's letters. All of his other letters, letters to the Corinthians, to the Thessalonians, to the Romans, to Timothy and Titus and Philemon, were written to address some problem in a church or to give counsel to an individual. But Ephesians stands alone in that the purpose for writing the letter is not because of a problem. Paul does not write to the saints in Ephesus to correct immoral behavior or wrong belief. The purpose of the letter is not to give advice or to counsel an individual. Paul wrote the letter not out of correction but to show the Ephesians (and now also us) what makes church church. The letter is a revelation of how Christian church is formed, of what holds church together, what sustains the church, how church grows. In other words, what makes this letter unique is that instead of exploring a human problem – whether behavior or belief or something else – this letter explores that unique identity which defines the church.

Over and over again in this letter, there is one phrase repeated: to the praise of his glory. This letter opens up for us the meaning of God's glory; that which is the essence of church, that which provides church with her identity, mission, purpose, and vision. As we will study this book over the summer, we'll discover that church is less about what we do and more about what God does, and our participating in God's work. This book tells us what God is doing; it opens up for us the work of God, the glory of God, and how we get to come along and be part of it.

There has been a tendency or trend among churches some years ago to try and be like the first century church, the early churches. It was not uncommon to hear Christians lament "if only our church was like the early church" or "if only we could be like the early church". Quite frankly, I

think participating in the early church would have been just as frustrating and joy-giving, just as challenging and surprising as being part of the church today. The early church had its full share of problems and disagreements, of misguided thinking and wrong actions. The early church had a lot right and a whole lot wrong too. But Ephesians helps correct this romanticizing view of the early church. It helps correct our nostalgic view for the way things were and the way we think it ought to be. It is written to help us stop comparing ourselves to the early church or to other churches in our community, our nation, or our world. Ephesians grounds us, centres us, shows us what's important and what's not by showing us the essence of church.

The temptation for every church is to follow what the business world tells us about how to function and grow; what pop culture tells us how to act; what psychologists and sociologists tell us about forming a group of people; what marketing says about branding yourself. Ephesians is the book that gives us a different voice; a voice that tells us what the Holy Spirit is doing in the church and how the Holy Spirit is creating, forming, growing, nurturing, sustaining, and blessing the church. The focus of this letter is all about God's glory, Christian discipleship and maturity, and church.

In our English Bibles, verses 3-14 are written using proper English grammar and sentence structure, including periods and commas, sentences and paragraphs, to help us understand what Paul is communicating. But in the original Greek, this was written as one very long, complex and impressive sentence. Theologians and commentators have struggled to articulate the significance of this single sentence – the power, strength, force, and magnitude of what Paul conveys in those

over 200 words. The sentence begins with the Greek word *eulogetos* (yoo-log-ay-tos) which means blessed and ends with the Greek word *doxes* (dox-ah) which means glory. This is a sentence that references Jesus Christ 15 times and refers to “in Christ” or in him eleven times. It is a sentence that speaks of the world God created and loves. A world in which Jesus Christ saves and redeems. A world in which the Holy Spirit blesses.

There is so much packed into these verses that I could probably spend the whole summer unpacking that complex Pauline sentence. But today I want us to focus on two things: how church is created and why church exists. Both of these should give clarity, meaning, and focus for us.

How is the church created? Well, in verse 3, we understand immediately that church begins with God. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us.* Paul starts his letter to the Ephesians – a letter that tells us the essence of church – by painting a picture of all that God does. To tell us what makes church church, Paul doesn’t spend time talking about ministries and Bible study groups, about what songs to sing or instruments to use, about strategies and marketing to attract more people to come, how many staff members to hire, or about how to build a beautiful church. Paul tells us about God and what God does.

As we read through this dramatic sentence, we begin to see what God’s work is about: God blesses, God chooses, God destines, God bestows, God lavishes, God makes known, God gathers up. This is all work that God does for the church. This is how the church is created.

Some of God's work has a past focus, some a present focus, and still other parts of God's work is a future focus. The letter starts with the image of blessing: God blessed. In verse 3 Paul writes *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* We notice from this opening that as God blesses us, God is also blessed. Blessed be God who blesses us. The first thing God does for his church is to bless. And as God blesses us, God Himself is also blessed. After all, what God does for His people comes out of who God is.

Then in verses 4 through 6, we read about how God formed the church. Paul reminds us that before the world was created, before creation itself existed, God chose us and destined us to be holy and blameless, children of God. In accordance with God's pleasure and will, God chose and destined us. Indeed you and I freely choose to love and follow and believe in Jesus Christ but that is only because God chose and destined us first. It is only because God first blessed us.

The present blessings of God we experience through God's actions of bestowing and lavishing his grace upon us. Through our adoption as children of God, we get to receive the benefits of such adoption: God bestows and lavishes us with grace. In the Bible, God's grace is used to describe different things. In this letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes the grace we receive in terms of redemption and forgiveness of sins.

The future blessing of God we experience through God making known to us his will and God gathering up. God makes known to us the mystery of his will. The mystery of his will is about being able to be part of the story and the way in which God does his work here on earth. He makes known to us the mystery of his will through wisdom and understanding. This doesn't happen in the context of downloading information into our brains. Wisdom is not impersonal, detached from relationship or experience. Wisdom isn't gleaned from science experiments or textbooks. The mystery of God's will is made known to us through wisdom and understanding which happens when we are in relationship with the Living God.

Then we read a powerful picture of the future blessing. God will gather up all things in heaven and on earth together. This letter to the Ephesians shows us the all-encompassing work of Jesus Christ in which all things are gathered up and we become whole women and men, part of the body of which Jesus Christ is the head.

In this we read how God forms the church through God's work of blessing, choosing, destining, bestowing, lavishing, making known and gathering up. This is how God forms his church – through his will, his pleasure, his purpose. He blesses, chooses, destines, bestows, lavishes, makes known, and gathers up. It's God's work but we get to be part of it. And all of this, all of God's work, is a gift of grace.

Paul teaches us that God forms his church through his pleasure and will, through his acts of blessing, choosing, destining, bestowing, lavishing, making known, and gathering up. Why did

God form the church? Why did he make us His people? In other words, why do we have the gift of salvation, the gift of being adopted as his children? Did God form the church so we can have life eternal? Did God form the church to focus first on reaching those who have not yet heard the message of the good news of Jesus Christ? Did God form the church to focus on matters of justice and compassion?

Paul repeats three times in this one sentence the primary purpose of the church; the reason the church exists. In verses 5 and 6 Paul writes “*In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace.*” In verses 11 and 12, Paul says “*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will in order that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be for the praise of his glory.*” And again in verses 13 and 14, “*having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory*”. God blessed, chose, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, and gathered his people all for the praise of his glory. He did not bless us so we can have eternal life, although that certainly is one of the blessings. He did not choose us so we can start programs and ministries that will enable others to be chosen. He did not bestow and lavish his grace on us so we now focus first on showing grace to others. God blessed, chose, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known and gathered up for his people to the praise of his glory. God formed the church for the praise of his glory. God sustains the church for the praise of his glory. God saves and redeems the church for the praise of his glory. God made us His people for the praise of his glory.

Glory – it is about manifesting the divine essence of God; it is about the revelation of God, it is about honouring who God is. So to live to the praise of his glory means to worship God as He is. We worship God through our words and speech, thoughts and deeds, and by doing so help others to see and praise him too. This is why the church exists – to the praise of his glory. To worship God for who God is. To show our community of Whitehorse, or wherever you may live, through our words and deeds who God is through love, compassion, grace, mercy.

Of course to glorify God includes receiving the promise of eternal life, includes having ministries that reach those who have not yet heard the good news, includes extending justice and compassion and mercy to others. But all those activities and pursuits flow from the primary focus of God's glory. We do those ministries for the praise of his glory – we do that to worship God for who God is and to reveal God to the community. Our friends who will be leading VBS this week are doing that ministry with the primary focus to glorify God. Because when God is glorified – God is revealed. And when God is revealed, it means evangelism takes place, it means acts of mercy and compassion are evident, it means the good news of Jesus Christ is heard.

In our conversations about the church health initiative, about hiring a second pastor, about what ministries to do; what is our focus? Is it on addressing some problem, some concern? Or is it about God's glory, to the praise of his glory. How do we frame our questions and conversations about who we are as God's church? Everything we have and everything we are in Christ comes

from God and returns to God; the God who blesses, chooses, destines, bestows, lavishes, makes known, and gathers up. It all begins with his will and ends with his glory.

God forms his church through his pleasure and will. God forms his church for the praise of his glory. This is the primary purpose of church. It starts with God and ends with God. It doesn't start and end with us, or even the forgiveness of sin. It all starts and ends with God.

We are God's blessed people who live by God's will and pleasure and for God's glory. Amen.