

“He chose us in him”

A sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

For the past three months we have been dealing with practical questions of living as Christians in this time and place. We’ve talked always about God’s future kingdom which comes by his power alone. That is really the question behind the question of living here and now. The deeper question, the real question, is: What lies behind it all?

As we look at the Western world we see that Christianity is faltering. Sunday church attendance is down, even apart from Covid. While you and I are here in church, we know we’re a minority. Many others are not in church and people are, generally speaking, not involved. We ask ourselves: What’s behind it all?

As one non-churchgoer said: “We don’t bother with church because we get along just fine. We get by, and we’re just as good as those people who go to church.”

If you talk to somebody who’s in a little bit of trouble, it doesn’t mean they are going to go to church. What people will say is: I get by. I live day by day. That’s not bad. That’s the basic model of AA. At the same time, what they are really saying is: It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you live your life doing whatever turns you on.

It likes the comedian Flip Wilson’s character, Reverend LeRoy, who was head of the church-that’s-happening-now. And that’s what many people belong to – the church that’s happening now.

We know, however that if the gospel is what it says it is, the churches should be crowded. Everybody should be there because eternity is what is at stake.

What do we Christians do? And that brings us to Ephesians 1:4: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world so that we should be holy and blameless before him.” What a remarkable verse. “He chose us” means “He elected us.” This, too, is the message of the gospel of John:

- John 1:13: “. . . who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”
- John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.”
- John 6:65: “. . . no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

That is predestination, or fate, or God did it. When we hear the word “predestination,” we start to back off and say: It can’t be that way. Are there not many points of view? Surely we must be tolerant. And the like.

Or we play the victim, as Flip Wilson taught us to say: “The devil made me do it.”

The question behind the question. First, there’s the problem of sin. Here we remember Luther’s epic battle with Erasmus. In 1525 Erasmus, who was by far and away the major intellectual figure of the time, wrote about the freedom of the will. What Erasmus said was that if there isn’t freedom of the will, if it isn’t all relative, you can’t have any morality. You can’t have any ethics. If it’s all God’s doing, then you can’t claim people are responsible. You can’t say they should live a certain way because, after all, Ephesians 1:4 says: “He elected us . . .” If everything is fate, then there is no meaning.

At the same time, if everything is relative, then there is no meaning. If everything is relative, if you have your truth, and I have mine; if everything is relative, different strokes for different folks, and all that, then there is, again, no meaning. Both stances are caught up in sin.

Second, we are trapped by the human situation. Thoreau put it quite well a hundred and fifty years ago: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

John Calvin wrote in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that our hearts are idol-making machines. Our hearts become factories of idols in which we fashion and refashion God to suit our needs and desires.

Luther asked: What is it that controls your life? What is it that grabs you? What is it that makes the final decision about who you are, and what you do? For you, that’s God. And of course it ends up being an idol.

G. K. Chesterton, as we also noted last week, famously said: “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.”

We are caught, even our hearts are idol-making factories.

Luther responded: What about sin, death, and the power of the devil?

- Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- 1 Cor 15:56: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”

- Hebrews 2:14: “. . . he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.”

Today, these – sin, death, and the power of the devil – aren’t taken seriously. They are jokes. Flip Wilson has Reverend LeRoy take up a collection so he can go to Las Vegas and study sin.

Think about all the jokes you’ve heard about St. Peter at the pearly gates.

Luther asked: What is the question behind the question? What is the question behind it all? And what’s behind this question of sin, death, and evil is the question of meaning or meaninglessness. If you say it’s all relative, that is just as meaningless as saying it’s all inexorable fate. Where is meaning?

Third, that brings us back to Ephesians 1:4: “He elected us in him before the foundation of the world.” That’s both a basic statement of the gospel and a great promise because we’re trapped. Whatever we do, we end up making idols, and that leads to desperation.

In spite of us and our idol-making hearts, he elected us in Jesus Christ so that in his death and resurrection we have been chosen and made his own before the foundation of the world. That means before Genesis 1:1. And then the verse goes on, and this is where it ties in with Luther’s response to Erasmus. Eph 1:4 says: “so that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

Fourth, the gospel gives **certainty** because it does not depend on us. It is outside of us, in spite of us. It gives freedom now. We are free now because, though sinful and broken, we partake in the great exchange. As Paul writes: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

In Hebrew “righteousness” and “**holiness**” are interchangeable. So what it says is: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the **holiness** of God.” It’s the great exchange. Like Ephesians 1:4: “We are elected” in Christ, and because we are given his **holiness**, we are “**holy** and blameless” before God. As Luther says, it’s the best deal ever, and it is forever.

Fifth: Thank God that God that he does it, and that he’s chosen us. It all seems impossible, and it is beyond our understanding. As Paul writes (Romans 11:29-36):

“For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable. . . . O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!

‘For who has known the mind of the

Lord,

or who has been his counselor?’

‘Or who has given a gift to him

that he might be repaid?’

For from him and to him and through him are all things. To him be glory for ever.
Amen”