

### **“Dream Big” – Eph 1:11-23 – Ascension Sunday – May 8, 2005**

They say one should never begin with an apology, but I find I have to do just that this morning. I acknowledge that today is Mother’s Day in the secular world, and Christian Family Sunday in The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s calendar – but I must confess at the same time that I am not very adept at grabbing a text from the Bible and twisting it to fit a specific theme, even a theme as honourable as either of those two notable ones.

So instead I have worked with the texts for Ascension, the day the church commemorate Jesus rising up into heaven at the end of visiting with His disciples following His rising from death. I could argue that this is even an older tradition than either of the other two competing for this Sunday, since celebrating Christ’s Ascension began more than sixteen hundred years ago, but that would only get me deeper in trouble!

There is a great temptation to follow the Hollywood approach, and focus on the Ascension event itself. After all, it is the kind of event that makes for good movies, or TV shows, especially the kind that hold the threat of terror not too far in the background, the ‘Apocalypse Soon’ kind of show. It should come as no surprise that Luke, with his flair for dramatic narrative, is the only gospel author who provides a description of these dramatic happenings.

At the same time, however, we should not be too surprised either that Paul makes no direct reference to the Ascension event itself, since he is more concerned with what the event meant than with the details of how it happened, as we see in the letter to the Ephesians. That letter is clearly targeted to Gentile Christians, that is people who had come to believe in Jesus, but who were not Jewish. These were people considered to be unacceptable by many of the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea, and considered unacceptable by their very nature. There were many of the ‘old guard’ who stood behind Paul ready to castigate him for his association with these untouchable Gentiles, never mind for his proclamation that they too were forgiven and accepted into God’s presence through their faith in Christ. These watchful members of the old guard defending the purity of the faith brought with them the exclusivity of their Jewish past, unable or at least unwilling to acknowledge the new and stunning and even irrational grace made flesh by God in Christ Jesus.

These cautious critics apparently had trouble letting go of their sense of being born into the legacy offered by God to the descendants of Abraham, or at least the Gentile believers in Christ must have been hearing a message that they were not entitled to God’s attention, grace and forgiveness, because Paul takes great pains to convince them they are also legitimate children of that promise, a promise sealed in Christ’s saving action, and confirmed in Christ’s being seated at the right hand of God.

We can hear from Paul’s repeated acclamations to the Gentiles of also being inheritors of God’s grace that those same fragile believers needed that affirmation, and it is not difficult to understand why. The church has had a long history, some two thousand years and counting, of finding ways to limit God’s grace. Almost instantly after the first rush of evangelistic fervor there soon followed the limiting cry of “when we say you’re forgiven and acceptable, we don’t mean you!”, a cry that continues to pour out in vitriolic diatribes on the airwaves today. Set against the uniting call of “you are one in Christ”, a devilish cacophony of “divide and conquer – don’t have anything to do with them, they’re not real Christians” throbs continuously through the mail, via the media, over the internet. Such divisive rejection was enough to dishearten the Gentile believers then, and it’s enough to dishearten and dispirit the equivalent unacceptables today. And almost always the most vitriolic rejections come from those who were not born into acceptability, yet vent their righteousness against those considered unacceptable by characteristics of birth. Ignoring the passionate declaration of Paul in scripture that there is neither Jew nor Greek, such protectionists have decried, “you can’t be a

believer because you're a foreigner". Ignoring the same passionate declaration that in Christ there is neither male nor female, some even within our denomination still protest against the ordination of women. And I hardly even need to mention the current bombasts and subtle maneuverings of those who would use sexuality as the latest way to find an excuse to exclude and reject others who also lay claim to the inheritance promised through belief in Christ.

Paul here directly challenges such exclusivism, reminding the Gentile believers that they also "in Christ have obtained an inheritance", that "in him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the good news of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." No longer are they outcasts, standing like orphans outside in the cold looking through the stained glass windows upon scenes of warmth, family, feast and festivity. Now, through the saving and reconciling action of God in Jesus, through his death, his resurrection, and ascending to sit at the right hand of God, those previously considered unacceptable have been made acceptable, those once considered outside the limits of God's grace have become the definition of grace, those who were denounced as unsaved and unsaveable have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit simply because they believe in Christ as saviour. Thank God that those who would condemn, who would reject, who would set limits and find innumerable ways to exclude from God's favour are not the judges in these matters; instead thank God that Christ himself, the living embodiment of God's love for all who would believe, is seated at the right hand of God who "has made him head over all things for the church." Thank God that it is Christ, the purveyor and displayer of God's grace who has been made judge over the living and the dead.

Quite the opposite of the dry, pinched, angry, resentful and narrow views of those who would try to limit God's grace and mercy, Paul proclaims in Christ's name a message of joy, of hope, of faith and love. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." Paul does not pray that they will somehow be changed to be acceptable – he gives thanks for them and for their faith in Christ and for the loving way they treat all the saints – all the others who profess their belief in Christ. "I do not cease to give thanks for you", Paul declares – not grudging and conditional and resentful limited acceptance.

But even more than unceasing thanks for them, Paul offers to these feeling-rejected believers, and to all who suffer rejection within the church today, an unbounded hope to which God calls those who would believe in Christ. "With the eyes of your heart enlightened", he proclaims, "you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints [believers], and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe". "With the eyes of your heart enlightened..." – not with hearts hardened, indeed quite the opposite, loving with the same love shown by Christ, we can begin to know the hope to which we are called. We can begin to 'dream big', to dream of heaven with the possibility, no – the certainty, of being included at that joyful feast.

And lest there is any temptation to fall into the trap of thinking that these hopes, these dreams are possible through any merit of ours, the error of believing that such hopes and dreams are only possible through good works, good living, good thoughts, or anything else we might do, Paul declares that this is "the gift of God", offered "while we were still dead through our trespasses".

What is our dream? What do we see when we 'dream big'? Perhaps it is that we will see the realization of Paul's proclamation of the body of Christ, the church, being one. "At one time", Paul writes, "you were ... strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." To the outsiders, to the unclean, to those once considered unacceptable to God, untouchable

by the faithful, Paul declares, “So [Jesus] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Paul’s passionate plea is for unity in the church. We recall his fervent prayer for those early Gentiles, and for today’s shunned, and for ourselves, a prayer that, “according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power 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, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

To Paul’s prayer I would add my own, that God grant you the opportunity to dream big, to dream that the acceptance of all people, Gentile or Jew, female or male, slave or free, will flood throughout the church, that the rubble from the “dividing wall” Christ has broken down will finally be cleared away, and that all God’s people will be able to praise and worship Him together, with one voice united in the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father, one God now and forever.