**Living in the Embrace of Wisdom**

**Text: Ephesians 5:17**

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Those of us who have a hearing loss know well the ability of the mind to make stuff up when we haven’t heard what someone has said. The mind does this so effortlessly that sometimes we don’t even know that it’s our imagination that’s manufacturing a key word. I discovered this years ago when chatting with a friend that I hadn’t seen for months. What he said as he greeted me was, “How was your year?” And I responded, “Ear? There’s nothing wrong with my ear!”

When the ear doesn’t quite hear something, the mind fills in the blank. And sometimes it’s quite a revelation when the word is repeated and we hear it correctly.

It works the same way with biblical knowledge. Or, at least, what passes for biblical knowledge. If we don’t understand something, we make stuff up. Sometimes entire churches or cultures make stuff up. And for that church or culture, a misunderstanding of biblical knowledge becomes conventional wisdom and is treated like gospel truth.

But occasionally the Holy Spirit suddenly speaks to us through a passage of scripture, and then it’s a great revelation, opening-up a whole new way of understanding the Bible and God and salvation and the Christian life. That place where we were made stuff up in order to fill in the gap in our understanding becomes filled instead with the Truth of God’s Word.

The Letter to the Ephesians has functioned in this way for me; as it did for the people who first heard it. One or more churches in or around the city of Ephesus were confused about how Jews and Gentiles could be living together peaceably in one congregation; drawn together under one plan of salvation. And they were probably making stuff up; claiming perhaps that one group just totally capitulated to the other side and isn’t that a shame! But that’s not what the scriptures say. The truth, revealed to the Ephesians, is that God in Christ has created a new common ground upon which both groups can stand with integrity.

In fact, the Truth revealed in Ephesians is even bigger than this. This letter reveals God’s grace-filled plan for the salvation of the *whole universe*! Not just for Jews and Gentiles or any other groups that were once at each other’s throats, not just for those who already believe that Jesus the Christ is Lord and Savior, ***no!*** The whole point of Ephesians is to reveal God’s plan in Christ Jesus to unite *all* people, and *all* things: things in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth. The author of Ephesians makes this clear back in the first chapter, beginning in verse 8:

“With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:8-10). And then, in chapter 4, it becomes clear that Jesus scooped-up all those things belonging to God that were *under* the earth as well.

 *All* things are to be gathered-up in Christ. This is the ultimate expression of the will of God. This is what we need to remember as we hear today’s text, Ephesians 5:17: “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” God’s will is that all things will be gathered-up in Christ. This has been God’s plan since before the beginning of time. Indeed, in the mystery of eternity, this plan has been accomplished already. Ephesians 1:4-5 says that *before the foundation of the world was laid*, God in Christ *adopted* us all as his children. Adopted. *Past* tense. The deed is done!

And this has all been accomplished by God’s grace. Note Ephesians 1:7: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, *according to the riches of his grace* that he *lavished* on us.” I love that verse. It’s not just that God in Christ has saved us by his grace; such grace has been *lavished* on us; poured *all over* us.

And just in case we missed the point, the author comes back to it in Ephesians 2:8): “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your *own* doing, it is the gift of God.”

Well of course it’s not our own doing. If God saved us in Christ before the foundation of the earth was laid, if God chose us in Christ long before we were even born, there is *no way* that we can do anything to contribute to our salvation. It’s already been done: by God, in Christ, through grace. As Pastor Helen likes to say, “God loves you, and there’s nothing that you can do about it.”

This is the wisdom that embraces us. We have been held in this loving embrace since before the day that we were born, and we will continue to be so held long after the day that we die.

Of course, this is an affront to our egos. We want to take some credit. We want to believe that, “Surely my good works have *something* to do with my salvation. Surely I get *some* credit for being such a good person. That’s why God loves me. Right? Please tell me that’s it’s so!” Well, of course, doing good things is part of the Christian life. But such good works *flow from* God’s grace, they are not a *precondition* for *receiving* grace. Salvation is *God’s* work, not ours.

Let me illustrate it this way. On October 8, 1956, New York Yankees pitcher Don Larsen pitched the only perfect game in World Series history. A perfect game is one in which nobody on the other team reaches first base. There are no runs, no hits, no errors, no walks; the pitcher faces the minimum of 27 batters and gets them all out.

The *pitcher* does this. *Don Larsen* did this. At least, that’s the way that we talk about it. But that’s kind of like one of those things that we make up in order to fill in the blank. We think we understand something and we imagine that it is so. The truth of the matter is that the pitcher’s teammates contribute mightily to that perfect game. It’s at least as much *their* doing as it is *his*. Especially the Larsen perfect game because, you see, Don Larsen wasn’t really a good pitcher; by his own admission. His lifetime record was 81 wins and 91 losses. I mean, he was such a mediocre pitcher that he played for 7 different teams, and one of them got stuck with him twice! And even in that perfect game, of those 27 Brooklyn Dodgers who were put out, only 7 of them were strike outs. Only 7 of them were put out by Larsen alone. The other 20 batters hit the ball, and Larsen’s teammates had to make the out.

One ball in particular. In the 5th inning, Dodger first basemen Gil Hodges comes to bat. Yankee outfielder Mickey Mantle is playing in right centerfield. But Hodges pulls the ball and hits it to deep *left* centerfield. Mantle has to sprint about 500 feet, across one of the biggest outfields in baseball, and at the last second he reaches out, backhands the ball on the fly, and Hodges is out. If Mantle misses that ball, Hodges is on 2nd base and the perfect game is no more.

So why should Larsen get all the credit? I mean, arguably, his teammates – especially Mantle – had *more* to do with it than he did.

Oh yes, and there’s one more thing: the last pitch of the game – called strike three by the umpire – it was really a ball. The umpire admitted as much years later.

Don Larsen was saved by his teammates and the umpire. And we have been saved by the grace of God. *Sola gratia!* *Only* by grace!! You and I, we had *nothing* to do with it. On any given day I need to give it my best shot, of course; but I can mess-up big time and my salvation is not in doubt. Because God, like Don Larsen’s teammates, is backing me up. Don Larsen was a lousy pitcher, yet his standing in the annals of baseball has been guaranteed. And we are all sinners, yet our salvation is guaranteed. God has guaranteed it, in Christ, for eternity.

We are saved by grace. And not just us, but *all* people. That’s what Ephesians says. God in Christ has gathered up *all* things; *all* people. God in Christ now holds all humanity in the embrace of wisdom and grace. All people who’ve ever lived, and all people who ever will live. Christ has broken down *all* of the dividing walls (Ephesians 2:14). Nothing in all Creation can *ever* separate humanity from the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). *Nothing*: not sin, not evil, not death; nothing. Christ has put all things under his feet. Sin and death and all forms of captivity have themselves been made captive to his will. This is Ephesians 4:7-9: when Christ descended into hell and ascended into heaven, he made captivity itself captive. I mean, if God really does judge the worst sinners in that place that we think of as being under the earth, they are being held captive there. But when the Crucified Christ descended into that dreadful place, he made captivity itself captive; he *ended* their captivity. One of the reasons why Good Friday is good is because, upon his death, Jesus went to that place where all of the worst sinners had been consigned to death and suffering, seemingly forever, and he saved them too! Because they already had been saved, before the foundation of the world was laid. God, in God’s gracious will – God, in God’s *sovereign* will, can save whoever God chooses to save!

There is a *wideness* to God’s mercy, as the old hymn says. Which is *not* to say that there’s *no* judgment for humanity’s sins. Scripture says that the judgment of God is like burning coals being heaped upon our heads (Romans 12:20). I take that to mean that we are judged by the burning of our consciences, as God reveals to us all of the pain that we’ve caused in our lifetime. But scripture reminds us that God’s judgment is overcome by God’s mercy. God’s wrath may hold the worst of sinners captive for a time, but – again – God has made captivity itself captive. When you have all eternity to work with, God’s grace can bring even mass murderers to their knees, as words of repentance finally come to their lips. God’s grace is that awesome, and that powerful. Hear again the words of Romans 8: “Nothing in all Creation can separate us from the love of God.”

If you’ve never heard scripture saying this before, bear in mind that we as a culture have been deaf since the days of the Puritans to just how wide the mercy of God is. We haven’t heard what God is saying, so we’ve made-up this stuff that says that we can contribute to our salvation by believing the right things and doing the right things. We’ve been so influenced by 18th century notions of freedom that we think that we can choose Jesus as our Lord and Savior. I mean, freedom is a great thing, but it’s foolishness to think that we’re so free as to be in charge of our own salvation. We didn’t choose Jesus; God in Christ chose us!! And no matter how many mistakes we make, how many bad choices we make, God’s choice cannot be undone. It is sealed in eternity; guaranteed for all time. That’s the fullness of the meaning of being saved by grace alone.

And this is good news. Because, if my standing as a Christian has nothing to do with my success, then my *failure* as a Christian doesn’t mean my complete and utter doom. And if all people are on the same footing in the eyes of God, then I can dispense with all of the judging of others that I’m prone to do. I don’t have to waste all of that time and energy. I can just embrace them, as God embraces me; as God embraces all of us.

This poem sums it up well:

I was shocked, confused, bewildered
As I entered Heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all,
Nor the lights or its decor.

But it was the folks in Heaven
Who made me sputter and gasp--
The Garden Club Gossips, the thieves
The liars and the trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade
Who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor
Who never said anything nice.

Bob, who I always thought
Was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine,
Looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal?
I would love to hear Your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here?
God must've made a mistake.

'And why is everyone so quiet,
So somber - give me a clue.'
'Hush, child,' He said,
'they're all in shock.
No one thought they'd be seeing you.'

It was finally the umpire who willed that World Series perfect game into being. He did so by the way in which he called the balls and strikes. So God – the *ultimate* Umpire – wills that all will be saved. And God, in God’s grace and wisdom, will make it so. God has *already* made it so. We are – all of us; all humanity – embraced by the grace and the wisdom and the love of God; now and forevermore. And there’s nothing that you can do about it. Amen.