

Gathering In

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Psalm 24, Ephesians 1:3-14

I might begin today with asking the same question that I asked of the children: Who are our people?

Who are our people?

Each week at staff meeting, we take time to reflect on our “best moment” from Sunday. A kaleidoscope of images rise up, along with breathtaking moments of song and prayer and praise. There is joy at seeing people who have been absent. Joy at the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love present both in the elements of worship and in the people who bring them alive.

Last week, my “best thing” was a mental snapshot of the Benediction Response as seen under the Arnold Park balcony; our children gathered at the worship table, a parent rocking a sleeping child in his arms.

But truthfully, for me, the best part of each week happens in the moments before worship begins. People entering this space, finding their places, reconnecting with others, preparing to worship. It is a deep consolation to watch us gather with joy and faith, wholeness and peace, knowing that we also bring with us our sorrow and pain, our longings and need.

We come as individuals and are made into a family. To watch this gathering is to watch us become church, again and again.

This morning, we are invited to gather around a word of grace that meets us where we are and draws us into the redemptive circle of God’s love. In it, we are reminded of who we are and whose we are and given a place of belonging. We are assured that God has blessed us, chosen us, and pursued us with grace in Jesus Christ, through whom God has redeemed us, forgiven us, and destined us for adoption as children of God.

We hear this invitation couched in the theological language of election; of predestination. And, if we balance all that we know and don’t know about this language of belonging, we might ask the question:

“How are we to understand this language of election?”

John Calvin understood election as an expression of the wonder of God’s grace. His reading of this passage (and the breadth of scripture) led him to believe that before the beginning of the world, by God’s free choice and out of the mystery of God’s will and divine purpose, some were chosen as the elect while others were not... I have a lawyer friend who rightly points out that such a claim leads even faithful people to draw dividing lines to keep out those who are different—as if homogeneity were a sign of our election.

Declaring election to be “a statement about the wonder of God’s grace in Jesus Christ,” George Stroup asserts that it “is misunderstood if it becomes primarily a question about the scope of God’s grace (who is included and who is not...”¹

In fact, 20th century theologian Karl Barth critiqued Calvin for not following his claim about election “in Christ” through to its proper conclusion: that if election is “in Christ” then Jesus Christ alone is the elect and that dying on the cross, he alone becomes the one who is rejected.²

In Christ’s election, all of humanity are inheritors of grace. Or to put it in the words of Ephesians: according to God’s good pleasure, God set forth in Jesus Christ to gather up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ in the fullness of time.

But we exist in the *tension* between the already and the not yet. We are bombarded by the world and even by the church with messages counter this word of grace.

Today is More Light Sunday. On this day, we celebrate the presence and spiritual gifts of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons and their families in our community of faith. As a congregation, we aspire to “make the Church a true community of hospitality...” and seek the full participation of all persons in the life, ministry, and witness of the church and in society without regard for sexual orientation, personal background, or human condition.

We set aside one Sunday each year to publically remember and renew these commitments. We affirm our call to minister in the name of Jesus Christ amid the tension between our present circumstances and the fullness of time.

Being Presbyterian, we have a committee to lead our efforts, the More Light committee, with whom I am privileged to serve. As advocates and educators, we are part of a larger movement seeking ecclesial change and social change.

We are living in a season of momentous change.

In July of 2011, our denomination removed language from its constitution that effectively barred the ordination of LGBTQ persons. On June 21st of this year—five days before the Supreme Court struck down barriers to same-gender marriages nationwide—the PC(USA) revised language in its constitution providing for marriage equality.

We have had many reasons to rejoice.

In the days that followed the Supreme Court decision, while my Facebook page took on the hue of a box of Skittles; the sea of rainbow profile pictures was juxtaposed with the angst, fear, and even outrage of Christian friends who disagree.

In the past three weeks, I’ve read a score of posts and tweets and blogs and articles. In the back of my head I compared the rhetoric against the enveloping grace of Ephesians, and it occurred to me that much of the *sturm und drang* of these weeks has been generated based on where WE’VE drawn the circle of grace.

This year, as part of the More Light committee’s work on gender justice, we’ve explored our attitudes toward difference. We’ve been helped by the Riddle Scale, which lays out a continuum of attitudes toward difference moving from repulsion, pity, tolerance, acceptance, support, admiration, appreciation, and nurturance.

The surprise and challenge has come at where Dr. Dorothy Riddle placed the dividing line between negative and positive attitudes.

We live in a culture and even a church that has lifted up tolerance and acceptance as positive values. Yet, the Riddle Scale considers them negative attitudes—that devalue those to whom they are directed. We only move into positive attitudes as we support, admire, appreciate, and nurture those who are different.

Pastor Derrick Weston, in a blog post for Presbyterian's Today, writes, "Our inclusivity can't be lip service. It can't be tolerance. It can't be acceptance. It has to be love, or it's not of Christ. Jesus didn't say, 'You will know you are disciples by your *tolerance* of one another.'"³

So where do we draw the circle of grace?

Do we exclude or pity the outsider, tolerate the different, or merely accommodate those outside the "norm?" OR will we seek to be supportive, working to safeguard the dignity and equality of those who are different?

Will we acknowledge how difficult it is to be different in our society and in our church, and find admiration for those who live it with courage and strength? Will we value the gifts that diversity brings, and appreciate others who help make our communion whole? Will we discover that difference is indispensable to the fullness of life together, and so nurture those connections with love and with grace?

In his exploration of Ephesians, Paul Achtemeier asserts that in Jesus Christ, God has accomplished "the unity of all humankind..." Yet, "Divisions exist still within the church, the very body of Christ, despite the fact that Christians are to be illumined by the hope and trust that God has redeemed all through the grace shown in the Son..."⁴

Can we trust this word of scripture, which assures us God destined us for adoption as his children and pursued us with grace in Jesus Christ, the beloved?⁵

We are all God's people—the same and the different, the transgender and queer, gay and lesbian, bisexual and straight, black and white, rich and poor, free and imprisoned, sinners and saints, and everyone in between.

We are all God's people, and we are gathered in through the grace of God. The circle of grace is wider than we can imagine, so it becomes our task to expand our imaginations, our hearts, and our welcome in support, admiration, appreciation and nurture for all those whom God gathers in.

This June, I have wept over the bigotry that claimed nine lives in Charleston South Carolina. I have rejoiced over marriage equality. I have rejoiced over the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the South Carolina State Capitol. I have been saddened by the failure of the NY Senate to vote on the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act, for the 8th year.

Through it, I resonate with the words of Elizabeth Smith,

...while I believe that these is a plan for the fullness of time, my eyes do not always see it in the world around me. In a world full of injustice, pain and division, these words of adoption, grace and gathering all things up are sometimes hard to hear. Indeed, there is tension between what God has already done in Christ and what is left to be done in the world.⁶

So I am thankful this day to have invitation into this word of surpassing grace.

In it, I hear how God meets us in our brokenness, gathers us into with the love of Christ, creates of us a community of grace, and challenges us to widen our embrace so that we might take part in the purposes of God in the world.

I am confident that, like our children at their baptism, God has blessed us all with the gift of belonging—to God and to each other. I remember the promises that we all make when any child is baptized. And I am confident that we are called to guide and nurture, by word and deed, with love and prayer, every child of God—without reservation—encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of God’s own family.

Who are your people?

Imagine how we might answer this question as we undertake God’s purpose of gathering in.

Amen.

¹ Stroup, George. Theological Perspective on Ephesians 1:3-14." *Feasting on the Word*. Yr B, Vol 3. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. Louisville: WJK, 2009. 232.

² Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol 2, Pt 2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957. 3-506.

³ Weston, Derrick. "Flaming." *Presbyterians Today: PC(USA) Blogs*. Web. 10 July 2015.

⁴ Achtemeier, Paul. Exegetical Perspective on Ephesians 1:3-14." *Feasting on the Word*. Yr B, Vol 3. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. Louisville: WJK, 2009. 235.

⁵ Ephesians 1:5-6, personal translation.

⁶ Smith, Elizabeth. "Gleanings from the Text: Ephesians 1:3-14." *Join the Feast: An Online Lectionary Resource from Union-PSCE*. Web. 16 June 2009.