

We Are A Family Growing in Christ!

(Ephesians 1:3-14) ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹ 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, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

In Christ Jesus in whom we live and move and have our being, dear fellow redeemed,

Earlier this year, when “shelter in place” orders were in effect throughout our country, husbands and wives, moms, dads, and kids suddenly found themselves spending more time together than they ever had before. That sounds like a good thing, doesn’t it – a silver lining in an otherwise dark cloud of trouble? But the numbers tell a different story. In the four months from March through June of this year, the number of couples seeking a divorce in our country was 34% higher compared to the same period in 2019. I’m sure it’s no coincidence that police departments throughout the nation received a record number of domestic violence complaints during the lockdown as well.

This is sad, isn’t it? And yet, on some level, it’s not surprising. You and I realize that just because people belong to a family, it doesn’t mean they are close and loving. I’m guessing that everyone here has a story about family members that haven’t spoken to each other in years, brothers, sisters, parents, children who can’t stand to be in the same room with each other. Because this is not at all uncommon, some people might wonder why we, as a group of Christians here at Mount Olive, choose to think of and refer to ourselves as a family. Does that mean that we fight like brothers and sisters? Does it mean that we play favorites and form cliques? I’d be lying if I said that such things never happen among this group of sinful human beings. But these are not the traits that make us family. God declares us a family. This is his vision for us and so it’s our vision for ourselves, for our congregation. We are a family, one that’s not content to put up with the worst version of what it means to be family, but one that is constantly growing closer to God and, therefore, closer to each other – not magically but through the means that God himself provides. We grow closer to God and each other through God’s means of grace – his Word and Sacraments which connect us to Jesus and all that he has done for us. In this beautiful section of Scripture before us from Ephesians 1, God shows us why and how “We Are A Family Growing IN CHRIST: 1) Chosen, 2) Adopted, and 3) Sealed.

It’s rather amazing that our God, who is perfectly independent and completely self-sufficient, chose to create a family for himself – not because he needed a family but because the people he created would be blessed to be known and loved by him. And so it was. How our first parents must

have enjoyed their walks with their heavenly Father in beautiful Eden during the cool of the day. That is until the day came when they hid from God. You remember why. It wasn't a kid's game. They were frightened because they had sinned. They remembered very clearly God's warning that disobedience would mean death for them. They thought if they could avoid God, they could avoid sin's consequences. But it was too late.

Their sin had already ruined everything: their relationship with God, with each other, and any hope for a future – an eternal future. For you see, sin not only brings physical death, the separation of the body from the soul. It brings eternal death, the sinner's separation from God forever. And where God is not present, there is only misery and suffering. This is the fate sin brought to Adam and Eve and all their offspring – all of us.

I'm reminded of this every time sin comes between me and someone else. Sin is the great separator. Every angry look, every snarky response, every cold shoulder is a reminder – this is how God should treat me and you. But he doesn't. Instead he goes out of his way to love and bless us. This is the truth that causes Paul to shout: **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3).**

Wonder of wonders, the God of all grace did not kick us out of his family. **“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” (Ephesians 1:4).** Even before Day 1 of creation week, God chose us to be part of his family. As all-knowing God, he knew in advance that we would disobey him. Still he chose us. But it's important to note, he did not choose to ignore, overlook, or excuse our sin. The only way that sinners can have a relationship with Holy God is if the sinners themselves become holy and blameless. Left to ourselves, there's nothing we can do to put away our sin. But there is something God can do! Already before the dawn of time, God devised a plan to take our sin away. You see what it says: God chose us “in him” – “in Christ.” In Christ, we sinners receive a new status before God. No matter what we've been or done, in Christ we are proclaimed holy and blameless – without sin. That's because it was God's plan all along to give us credit for the holy life of love that Jesus would live as our Substitute when he came to our world as our perfect Brother. By the grace God showed us in Christ before we or the world came to be, you and I were chosen to be members of God's family. God has always loved you and has always wanted you to be his child IN CHRIST. You can count on it!

And you can count on this: when God plans something, he makes sure that it happens. **“In love⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” (Ephesians 1:5-6).** The word “predestined” has at its root meaning the idea of establishing boundaries ahead of time. Picture guardrails like those on a highway, keeping people from veering off on either side so that they safely reach their goal. In eternity God had chosen us to be his children. In time God carried out his plan for us, guiding the course of our lives so that you and I would be “adopted to sonship through Jesus Christ.” Friends, it's really this simple: God who has always loved you, always wanted you to be his own, was happy to see it that the events of your life unfolded in such a way that you would be adopted into his family through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Adoption was necessary. Because of our sin we were not born the natural children of God. So he saw to it that we were “reborn” as his “sons” through baptism. By the way, Paul is not being a sexist here. In the Roman Empire of which Paul was a citizen, only sons could be heirs. Daughters did not inherit anything from their parents. In God's church, all of us, women, girls, boys, and men, we are all like those Roman sons. We are all heirs. What do we inherit? The gifts that God's own Son, our Brother Jesus left to us upon his death: **“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace⁸ that he lavished on us.” (Ephesians 1:7-8).** The same Jesus with whose holiness

we are credited, paid the ransom to free us from the curse of our sin. The price to have us in his family did not come cheaply for our God. The cost was nothing less than the most precious substance in all the universe – the blood of God’s one and only Son.

Jesus’ blood frees us from a lifetime of sin. Everything is taken care of, paid in full. Not one sin can be charged to you. Where there is no sin, there is no guilt. And where there is no guilt, there is no punishment. You, my friend, are free to enjoy the place that Jesus has earned for you in the family of God forever.

God wants you to live your life secure in his love. He chose you in Christ before time began. He wants you to know that you are not some spiritual accident or a mere afterthought in his saving plan. He adopted you in Christ so that you may confidently celebrate your place in his family. And finally he wants you to know that “...**you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.**” (Ephesians 1:13-14). God is so determined to have us in his family forever that he has marked us with his Holy Spirit. I think of Andy in the movie “Toy Story.” Do you remember what he did to make sure that no one else could claim that Woody or Buzz as their own? He marked them. He put his name on them. God has marked you. He’s put his Spirit in you to assure you that you are so valuable to him that he is coming back for you to take you to heaven where you will enjoy the eternal happiness earned for you by our Redeemer Jesus.

This same Spirit who lives in you is busy working in you. It’s the Spirit of God who takes the gospel of salvation and uses it to make a life-saving connection between you and Jesus. To unbelievers, the gospel is a great mystery. But not to you. The Spirit has unlocked the mystery. He has shown you how Jesus is God’s answer to the sin that once separated you from him. As long as the Spirit keeps you plugged into Jesus, you remain God’s precious son or daughter. This is true for everyone of us. In fact, this is why God has brought us together as a family here at Mount Olive.

Alone, we are easy prey for our spiritual enemies. Satan knows how to play on our doubts and weaknesses as he tries to separate each of us from Christ. He gets us to question God’s love or the genuineness of our faith. Satan throws our sin, past and present, in our face as he seeks to convince us that we have no business calling ourselves Christ’s followers and God’s children. But just about the time when it seems like Satan might succeed and do me in, God sends one or all of you to the rescue. Your presence here summons me to worship. You expect to see me in this house of God where you know I will hear the very word of forgiveness that will drown out the devil’s lies as it strengthens my faith in God’s promises. Here in this family you pray for me and with me. You raise your voice in song and sing to me God’s strength and comfort. You invite me to Bible class and Life Groups. You offer to help me train my children and grandchildren in Christ’s truths. And, here you share your life with me. I see the challenges you have, the fears you face, and I see how God sustains you through them all. You are my living Bible, as the gospel works in you and through you.

As I mentioned earlier, this family isn’t perfect. Sometimes we say or do things that cause each other hurt and pain. I could wish that would never happen. But because it does, I’m so glad that we are related by blood – the blood of Jesus that covers our sins, heals our hurts, and always brings us back together again. Our family crest is the Savior’s cross to which each of us is drawn as together we explore the Scriptures and celebrate the sacrament. Today let’s recommit ourselves to spending time together in the Word, be it virtually for the time being, or here in person. For we have God’s own promise that through his gospel we are and will remain a family growing in Christ – always to the praise of God’s glory! Amen