

*Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So*  
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost  
Gretchen Schoon Tanis  
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Text: Ephesians 1: 3-14

It's good to be home! On behalf of RELISH, our English language congregation of Hannover I bring greetings. One of the great things about coming to our home congregation is I can be honest and know I am received in loving kindness – so rest assured that we will finish on time today because the World Cup final starts directly at the end of worship so we need to be efficient today!

But I need to be honest a second time actually, and this one a bit more heartfelt. When I was invited to be the preacher this Sunday Pastors Jill and Gordon gave me some freedom in the scripture passages for today. That's code word for, "Did you have a good sermon in the past you would like to use again?" But we at RELISH follow the lectionary like you do, so I said we could just simply follow on with the lectionary passages for today. And then I get King David dancing into town naked, John the Baptist getting beheaded, and some convoluted passage with Ephesians that on first pass makes no sense whatsoever! So I of course chose to focus on our passage from Ephesians. Why in the world would I do that you ask? Because on the second reading (or third or fourth) I realized there was a wonderful three point sermon sitting there in the midst – a Reformed preacher's dream come true! Here in the first chapter of Ephesians we have theology that covers past, present and future: God who chose us (past), Christ who forgives and redeems us (present), and the Holy Spirit who validates seals our future.

And because it's good to be home in our Reformed family we might as well begin in the deep end of predestination! In verse four of our passage today we read that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. (v. 4) **God chose you!** It boggles the mind to think about the fact that God chose us before the foundation of the world. I don't want to delve too deeply into the theology of predestination here because that is not the theological intent in this

passage. We are all well aware that historically there have been severe problems with a mindset of superiority that has come with the concept of being chosen by God. But I think the pendulum, in many cases, has swung to the other extreme with people thinking they are not worthy at all. Let us consider the beauty and wonder that comes from this idea – God chose you! My husband Phil and I often laugh that we stumbled upon a very cliché church plant name for our congregation in Hannover of RELISH (which stands for Reformed English Language International Service of Hannover) but as we gather together month by month I began to recognize what a blessing that name actually has become for us. Because another word for relish is to “take delight in” and I have found it to be a powerful message to remind people that God takes delight in us. God has chosen YOU to be the parent of your children. God has chosen YOU to be that specific co-worker. God has chosen YOU to be that neighbor or teammate. There is an absolutely stunning mystery to God’s plans for our lives that leaves me in awe and wonder. Now I want to be careful of course because there are situations of addiction, abuse, mistreatment where some may find themselves and I have to say that it is not God’s choice for you to be in situations that do not line up with God’s characteristics of love and grace and abundance. God’s intention for choosing us is to live lives that are holy and blameless and full of God’s love. What new perspective on your life will you take if you marvel at the miracle that God has chosen you?

Second, our present is transformed through the forgiveness and redemption of Christ. Verse seven reads, “In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us...” I find it intriguing that forgiveness and redemption are held in conjunction here because they feel synonymous to me. These Greek words cover the concept of ransom or being paid for. I know that Pastor Gordon has just spent the past year at least helping us undo the theological pitfalls of Christ’s ransom for our sins, so I would like to, instead, offer you an image of redemption.

Many of you know that 15 years ago my dad died suddenly due to injuries from a car accident. With any sudden and tragic loss it took me time to get my mind and heart around what happened but I knew that an important part of my healing process would be to see the location where his car accident took place. His accident happened on the north side of Holland,

and it took me many months even to drive on that side of town. Ten or eleven months after his accident I was ready to see the spot where his accident happened. A friend of mine volunteered to go with me and when we arrived on the scene I was utterly moved by what I saw – there on the very edge of the field where my dad's car went off the road you could still faintly see the marks in the ground. And there, where the soil had been churned up by the cars, wild flowers were growing in the divots of the ground. And as I knelt there and soaked in this scene of beauty where it had once been a scene of tragedy I was overwhelmed by this sense of redemption – here God had redeemed a space that had once been full of tragedy and turned it into something beautiful. And it is through Christ those areas of tragedy in our lives, those places where the soil of our lives is churned and marred by our choices, those are the places where God's redemption allows wild flowers to grow.

Third, our future is sealed and validated by the Holy Spirit. I asked you, during the passing of the peace, to talk about what your image of being sealed looked like. For my third moment of honesty with you this morning, the first image that popped into my mind when thinking about being sealed was covering leftovers with plastic wrap to put in a refrigerator. What was your image? Here, to be sealed by the Holy Spirit, means we have a down payment of God's future for us in heaven. To be sealed means we have a mark of protection, a stamp of validity. Allow me to share a story with you about my friend Fereshsteh.

Over the winter months I took an intensive German language course and my friend Fereshsteh was one of the women in my class. She is from Iran and at first was very shy and soft-spoken. Through the course of initial weeks of class we learned that she was looking for a new place to live closer to the city center of Hannover but was having a hard time finding an apartment. During a break one day I asked if she had looked for other Iranian women, perhaps university students that she could live with. She told me she didn't think that was a good idea because of politics. I asked her what she meant and very quietly she told me she was a Christian. My eyes lit up and I said I was a Christian too! Then her eyes lit up and we began a friendship as best as we could through our limited language of German.

About a month later the women of class gathered together one night for supper and by then we had gained more language in order to share more of our life stories. That night we learned the story of Fereshsteh. She was an Olympic kayaker and canoer for Iran – have you watched the Olympics where individuals kayak through river courses? That was her sport. She would often travel with her team to competitions outside of Iran and during one trip abroad she was speaking on the phone with a friend about going to church on the Sunday. One of her teammates overheard her and when they arrived back to Iran the teammate turned her in to the authorities. In Iran, although Christianity is not officially an illegal religion, Christians face severe discrimination and persecution. Fereshsteh feared for her life so went into hiding. For three months she stayed in inside a house without once coming out. Her family moved houses. Over the course of one year they saved enough money to send Fereshsteh out of the country to France. When she arrived in France they told her they couldn't do anything to help her but to go to Germany instead. Fereshsteh had one friend in the canoeing circuit that she knew in Stuttgart so she simply ended up on her doorstep seeking help. This friend brought her to German refugee authorities and they asked for identification. Like so many stories we know from our southern border, the man who the family paid to help Fereshsteh out of the country demanded her passport as collateral. When she arrived in Germany he took her passport and all her remaining money. In order to verify her identity she showed the German authorities her awards from winning gold medal at the Asian region for Olympic kayaking.

I wondered, Gordon, and you're welcome to include this in your thesis to seal things up, if this isn't what it is like with God. Jesus has won the awards for us that validate our citizenship in the family of God. In our passage from Ephesians, to be sealed by the Holy Spirit means that we carry the stamp of validation on our lives. We are marked as God's own and protected until we come to see God face to face.

Friends, God has chosen us, Christ has redeemed us, the Spirit has validated us but so what? How will our lives be transformed by these truths today? This brings me to our Old Testament and Gospel passage for today. Very simply put they are stories about dancing. We have King David dancing into Jerusalem in praise of God and we have Herodias, daughter of Herod, dancing to please the politicians. To round out our Trinitarian

perspective I would like to point out to you that three times in our passage in Ephesians the phrase “to the praise of his glory” is repeated. Dance like David today in praise of God! To close I borrow words from Allen VerHey in his commentary on Ephesians: “We do not fulfill the vocation to *be* a praise of God’s glory simply by joining our voice to a hymn on a Sunday morning or simply by saying Amen to a prayer. The vocation to *be* a praise of God’s glory is much more demanding than that. The community of the church is called to lives and a common life that display already something of the good future of God.” God has chosen you, redeemed you, validated you, may the lives of the redeemed say so! Amen.