

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Alleluia People: A Called Community”

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Genesis 12:1-3; Ephesians 1:1-14

“You...you Americans. I choose you.” I can still hear the words echoing in my head. Cindy and I, along with another couple, had taken a spring break trip to Venice. One day we rented a car and headed to Verona. It was late in the day and we needed to eat. So, we were wandering a plaza filled with multiple outdoor dining spaces. I would like to say I was looking for the best place, but I wasn't. I was looking for the cheapest. As we were examining the menus and their prices we heard, “You...you Americans. I choose you. You are always in a hurry to eat. Come here and I will give you the best meal of your life and show you how you should eat.” The person speaking was the smiling, pleasant looking, owner of one of the open-air cafes. I'm still not sure why we agreed but we did. In fact, not only did we agree to eat at his establishment, but we let him choose the menu...and I didn't even look at the prices. In the end, we all thought it was one of the best, and most leisurely meals we had ever eaten...and still think so to this day. “You...you Americans I choose you.”

What I would like you to do for a moment is to close your eyes and imagine hearing those words, “You, you people I choose you.” But instead of imagining a wonderful café owner saying them, imagine for a moment, that it is God speaking. “You, you people, I choose you.” If you can do that, then you can understand the heart of the Letter to the Ephesians. You can begin to sense how it is that God chooses individuals to be Alleluia People. As a reminder, Alleluia People are those who through faith in Jesus Christ live lives filled with gratefulness, joyfulness and fearlessness. What Paul tells those folks in Ephesus, and tells us here this morning, is that we are Alleluia People, not because of luck or fate, but because we have been chosen by God to be so. Just as surely as Abram and Sarai were chosen by God, the Ephesians and we were chosen. In fact, he says we were chosen before the foundation of the world to be Alleluia People. And as those who have been chosen, in order that we live into our new Alleluia People lives, we are invited to an amazing five course spiritual meal that has been prepared for us that we might become capable of being the Alleluia People God desires us to be. If you are ready then, let us go to the table.

Course one is redemption. Paul tells us that in Christ we have been given the gift of redemption. Redemption is that process where a person is moved from a captivity to freedom; from being useless to useful. One of my vivid memories as a child was getting Green Stamps. Green Stamps were given away for purchases at grocery stores and gas stations. People saved them and put them in little books. My mother would always let my brothers and I lick the stamps and stick them in the books. When you had enough books, you visited the Redemption Center and exchanged them for things like toasters and waffle irons. In a sense then you were redeeming them. You were taking them out of captivity and into freedom where they could be useful and live into their toaster potential. This is the sense in which Paul used redemption. We were moved from captivity, perhaps captivity to our self-centered lives, and into a new freedom of Christ-centered lives in which we could live into our full potential as Alleluia People.

Course two is forgiveness. Paul tells us that we have been given the gift of forgiveness. What this means is that our past is our past. One of the great problems of life is that sin and sins, refuse to allow us to move forward in our lives of faith. They are like anchors, dug in, restricting our movement. Not allowing us to move forward and living into our potential as Alleluia People. Forgiveness is alike a pair of bolt cutters that snaps the anchor chain and allows us to move forward. To move more and more toward being Alleluia People.

Course three is wisdom and insight. What this means is that we can begin to see God's purpose behind the work of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. We can see in Jesus what an alleluia life ought to look like. We can see the path that we are to be taking as we live into our Alleluia Person potential. We can also see this path as an outpouring of God's love for the world, intended to transform us.

Course four is inheritance. This is where our story connects with the ancient story of God's people. The children of Abraham were chosen by God to be blessed so that they could be a blessing to the world; so that they could be God's change agents working to make this an alleluia world. By our faith in Christ we have been adopted into that family of blessing and so we share in their inheritance of blessings and blessing. We become capable not only of being Alleluia People for ourselves and for our own journeys of faith, but we become those who can bless others that they might discover what it is to be Alleluia People as well.

Course five is the Holy Spirit. We have been given the very Spirit of God to live and move within us, insuring us that all that we have been given and promised in this spiritual meal will never be lost. I am not sure how many of you may remember or have seen the videos of some of the first space walks in the Gemini program. As the astronauts left the capsule, they would be tethered by a cable which provided them with life support and insured that they did not drift into space. This is what it is like to be sealed in the Holy Spirit. We are tethered to God and God's blessings. We are insured that the life support we need to be Alleluia People will never be lost.

Even with all of that having been said, there is still one more gift we receive, and it is probably the greatest gift of all; that this meal is already paid for. Unlike in Italy where we had to pull out our plastic to pay for dinner, Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, paid the full price so that we can come to the table and feast. In fact, there is nothing we have or could pay that would make this meal available to us. Our good works cannot buy this meal. Our prayers cannot buy this meal. Our failings cannot keep us from coming to this meal. All we can do is participate in this act of infinite love.

This morning then as the communion elements are passed I hope that you will ask yourselves this question, "How I am allowing this meal, this five-course meal, to empower to me to be an Alleluia Person and to be part of an Alleluia People?"