Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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United Under Christ
Ephesians 1:1-10

Our Fruit of the Spirit sermon series continues next week. For our spiritual diet, this week, we are adding into our sermon “menu” something to pull it all together, so to speak. We are keeping with Paul’s epistle writings; with how God hopes to work in and through us; and with reminding ourselves of goals for Christian faith and life.

Instead of Galatians, though, today we are in Ephesians, which William Barclay calls the "queen of the Epistles" and Samuel Taylor Coleridge claims is "the divinest composition of man." Ephesians 1:1-10 is today’s, 8th Sunday after Pentecost, lectionary reading.

Mister Rogers would say change can be difficult; it’s often for the better. Think of all the worship changes you have graciously and successfully endured over the last 6 months. For example, it seems most appreciate our new way of doing the Call to Worship. When a leader now starts worship, everyone has caught on (without even needing to look at the bulletin). Let’s enthusiastically verify it, again… "This is the day the Lord has made… Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

This simple Call to Worship designates our time as holy, different from what we do during the rest of the day and week. It's a time of reprioritizing and being glad in the Lord, even if our hearts are heavy, we feel distant from someone, or our relationship with the Lord isn’t even great at the moment.

This invites us to respond/ to react to our transforming God and how God has been and is engaged in our lives and throughout the world. Starting worship this way realizes it is not-about-us time. It’s about-OUR-Lord time. It thrusts us into remembering we are the creature, praising God for being our Creator!
Similarly, the book of Ephesians starts with praise and blessing God. The small Christian congregations, this epistle was written for, are connected by this letter's greeting, “Grace to you and peace... praise be to the God, of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It offers an invitation into God's unifying presence and presents a sweet taste of God's love thru His Son. One commentary writes ‘becoming and being a Christian depends upon what Christ alone has accomplished’ (New Interpreter’s Commentary). Verses 1-10 celebrate many blessings in Christ. These Scriptures rejoice in God’s: wisdom, forethought and election; the joy we are saved; and how we are to be one under Christ.

Does this long list sound like excessive blessings?! It’s meant to! In the original language, verses 3-14 are all one intentional sentence packed with dependent clause after clause. Paul’s description of us being: chosen and adopted, predestined and loved, forgiven and purposed draw a glorious picture like a Communion cup being poured into, and into, and into... where the blessings overflow, cascading down on hands, table, floor.

Likewise, Psalm 133 poetically and baptismally illustrating God’s people unified in Christ is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, down upon the collar, down on the robe. Our cup overflows!

Do you feel abundantly blessed today?

Let’s just take ten seconds to think of some of ways God has been good to us and wanted what was best for us in life — and just how He has blessed us—just ten seconds... in the silence. [Let ten seconds elapse.] Imagine how pleased God is to know that you thought of Him right now. Thanking him in your heart.

During our after-worship Lemonade in the Shade, it would be a fun experiment to share thoughts and blessings together for God’s glory. Just this week I had the gift of being with one member who was amazingly grateful, especially considering the circumstances.
I was talking with our 95-year-old Peyton Morgan. He sadly experienced the death of one of his children. Despite his grief, by the grace of God and faith in Christ’s resurrection, he reflects over his life and claims fulfillment and blessedness. He also said a short sentence that simplifies the meaning of a complex word in these vvs. (Some people get really confused by its definition.) Peyton said, “When you’re a Christian, you can relax!” That’s basically what the blessing of predestination means. We’re destined for adoption. Our sovereign God is in charge, so let him be just that.

The apostle Paul continues unpacking good blessings in these verses. God gathers up all things in Christ, or under Christ. Unity under one head. We are the body UNDERNEATH Christ’s anointed head. We are under his authority, like a supreme court judge who hears lawyer’s debates then declares final truth, a just decision.

“In a world often full of confusion, where things do not always “add up” or make sense, we look forward to the time, when everything will be brought into meaningful relationship under the leadership of Christ” (Study Bible, p. 1791).

There is but one leader of this congregation, and ideally all churches. As for me, and this church, we will serve the Lord; submit to his authority. For we know that Jesus has put everything under his feet. The last enemy was death and Jesus conquered even death on a cross (1 Cor. 15).

You will recall, during the Spring, we recited each Sunday a portion of the Brief Statement of Faith. Some of it declares, “In sovereign love, God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God’s image... to live as one community. The Spirit... binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.”

The realist in us, though, acknowledges that the church universal, ie. “the holy catholic Church,” we speak of in the Apostle’s Creed, doesn’t always act as ONE. We get so territorial. We forget our baptism in the ONE Spirit. We revert back to our “old self” that, as Walter Bruggerman says, is “massively reinforced by the passions of our culture.” The reason the “old self” continues to live and the reason we don’t have unity is fear. All kinds of ecclesiastical, societal, and person fear.
Admittedly, some of my interpersonal discontent does not get dealt with in a healthy manner because of fears.

Do you long for society to recapture liberty to just talk to people, without fear of divisiveness. 
Do you also hunger for our children to see more togetherness than dissension, like we’ve seen over recent decades?
Do you thirst for freedom to be our unified political party, instead of this one vs. that one?
John Calvin once professed that the Devil’s chief end was disunity and division.
Surely this breaks God’s heart when we continue to be so divided.

Maybe you’ve heard this analogy.

German philosopher Author Schopenhauer suggests the church is like a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. "The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And, in the lonely night of earth's winter sometimes we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness." Fortunately, Christ has given us an alternative- to forgive each other for the pokes we receive. That allows us to stay together and stay warm.

Just how do we become one? Maybe the picture of a Christian marriage helps. Next weekend, I have the blessing of officiating the wedding union of two of our young adults. Rachel Evancho and Michael Yu will publically become one in Christ. A very beautiful thing happens in a marriage service. They do not leave worship down separate aisles, by which they entered. They leave united. They leave, arm in arm, down the center aisle, to symbolize the fact that God's addition has been completed! Although it defies mathematical laws, one plus one equals one. They are integrated/ comingled/ combined in faith, hope and love.

Unity under Christ is not up to US, though. The relieving good news is that the living, activating Spirit does this. As recipients, we receive the blessing of unity, similar to receiving the fruit of the Spirit. Ephesians 2:8 famously asserts that “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”
That said, God, obviously, longs for us to be useful vessels/holy temples/malleable clay for God’s good. Be an answer to the prayer our Lord prayed for unity.

“to do good works, which God prepared beforehand
to be our way of life” (2:10).

I want to open my heart to the Spirit, even half as much as I open my cell.

As we wonder where and how we can be more open as a conduit/a helpful channel, let’s keep in mind how Paul directs us about this in Eph. 4:3-6. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

This unity is not limited to earthly purposes; it is also for “all things in heaven and on earth together,” so, in Christ, global and cosmic unity ultimately prevails “when the times have reached their fulfillment.”

The God of all universes and galaxies, living inside us, also dwells in our hearts. He itches to have us share his blessings to a hungry, hurting, and needy world.

So, let your cup overflow with the love of our Creator today/this week/ until death do us part. AMEN!? 