

“Predestination”
Ephesians 1:3-14
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8th Sunday after Pentecost
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Holy and blameless. Predestined us through Jesus Christ. Glory of God’s grace freely bestowed. Blah, blah, blah. There’s more churchy phrases packed into this Ephesians intro than there are Hons in Hampden. The introduction of one of the letters of Paul is usually the part that we skip over. I’m not sure why I chose it since I could have preached on Amos’ plumb line judging the nations for their lack of attention to the poor – no contemporary relevance there! Or King Herod demonstrating that a weak leader is one who makes decisions based on his self-image rather than what’s right – nothing to preach on there!

It could be that in this season of longevity between pastor and congregation, I’ve already picked all the low hanging fruit and am looking for a challenge. Or it could be that I’m actually being more prophetic than you might imagine. I mean, most pastors worry about getting run out of town for calling out white supremacy, or criticizing a sitting President, or saying gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are loved, loved, loved by God. But at Brown Memorial, the pastor is more likely to get run out of town for preaching on Predestination.

It’s risky to pull back that veil on this topic since, in a congregation of former Baptists, Catholics, charismatics, Mennonites, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, non-denoms, and all things in between, “predestination” is a theological conviction least likely to unify us. I learned this the hard way many years ago in pastoral training. I was working as a chaplain in a heart hospital in Atlanta. Paged by the supervising nurse to the room of a distraught patient and his family who had recently received news of a severe, life altering and potentially deadly condition, I arrived to find the family gathered already with their own pastor present. I introduced myself and the pastor in a gruff tone asked immediately what tradition I represented. I told him I was Presbyterian. “Well then,” he said angrily, “I suppose you think this was predestined.”

When I was pastoring in Memphis, a city where Christianity is the default instead of an odd choice, we devoted an entire portion of the new member’s class to predestination. It was the question most often asked from Christians new to Presbyterianism. Many of the people who came to that class were people like me who had been told that predestination was a belief that God controlled everyone like puppets. “Since they believe that God controls everything, they don’t have to take responsibility for any of their actions,” one person had been told. I learned two things in that process. The first is never to judge a religious tradition only by its critics. The second is that predestination is a powerful expression of the nature of God. Like anything powerful, when it runs amuck it can harm deeply. But at its root, it is some of the best news I have ever heard.

That news is that God’s election of us in Christ – election is another way of speaking of predestination – is an affirmation that the God we struggle to articulate,

worship, and serve is loving beyond what we can imagine. God's love is more powerful and pervasive beyond what we can imagine. The creation of the world is an expression of that love. The creation of human beings alongside all of creation is an expression of that love. The giving of laws, then prophets, then Jesus – the Word, the church, these are all expression of the never-give-up, never-ending love of God.

This doctrine of predestination says that we can't and we don't earn love which makes it exceedingly difficult for Americans to accept. We think we can earn anything. Liberals prefer to speak of universal care – that all people *deserve* to be loved. But love can't be compelled. Love always comes as a gift from its giver. It can be received in no other way. Ephesians speaks of this gift as a choice that God makes before the world or any of us was even born. A choice to love us. A choice to claim us into God's family simply because God makes this choice.

Maybe you're thinking, "so what" or "big deal." God loves us. It's the first message and the repeating one that a lot of us get at church. But the lack of that foundational message is at the root of a lot of problems in our lives and in our world. Some of us spend our whole lives trying to earn love from working ourselves to death first in school, then in a career to prove our worth. Others of us get caught in a cycle of failed relationships, trying to earn love from a partner that we never received from a parent. Some of us self medicate to numb ourselves to the pain of feeling unloved or unlovable. In El Salvador, some told us that the gangs rose up precisely to provide family to children looking for love.

Some of us think others are unlovable, undeserving of God's love and therefore our own. From the othering of immigrants, to the fear of police officers, to the anti-Semitism threaded through the church's history, to the racism that persists like a virus, we're always looking for ways to twist the good news of God's love into something that is deserved or not, instead of the very root and reality of who or what God is.

"God [likewise] predestined us through Jesus Christy to be adopted children," Ephesians says. This adoption – this decision to choose us – is what makes predestination so difficult for some to accept. Most of the time we all speak of faith with the idea that we choose God. We choose to be believers, or church attendees, or Jesus followers. Whether by virtue of our beliefs or our behaviors, our choosing is what so many Christians want to protect. Predestination flips that on its head. *God adopts us*. Why? Because God chooses to love us. "The riches of God's grace that God lavished on us," one translation of Ephesians says.

Of course, if you follow the logic it's possible that God doesn't choose some of us which is exactly what the writers of the Westminster Confession wrote in the 17th century. It turned predestination from an announcement of the good news that we are saved through God's grace to an announcement that many others are condemned to eternal damnation. This "double predestination," as it's called – some are predestinated to everlasting life; others everlasting death – turned a doctrine of *wonder* of God's grace into a doctrine about the *scope* of that grace.¹ It also turned this doctrine into ammunition against enemies, undermining the core belief that ultimate judgment belongs only to Christ. Karl Barth argued in the 20th century that

¹ Thanks to my seminary theology professor, George Stroupe, for this wording in "Theological

since Christ alone is both the electing God and the elected human we are all elected in God through grace.

But it's not just exclusivists who have trouble with this notion of God's love. It's also activists who fear that announcing God's love without any sense of God's requirements for justice gives people free reign to go on sinning. But justice is not opposed to love, it is a full expression of it. It's what keeps love from being sentimentality. And for those who do continue with oppression, God's unearned love does not mean that there is no judgment. It simply tells us more about the nature of the one who judges us. An assurance that God's love is stronger than our ability to resist it is reassurance that justice will be done and judgment will be enacted more broadly than we can imagine.

No one earns their place in the family of God. There is no hierarchy. Which means that this doctrine is a lot more political than we might have first imagined. If we sit at the table of God it is not because we deserve to be there. It is because God wants us there. We do not get to say who belongs at that table. God is the host. We are all guests. If you are a hungry person who finds yourself seated at a fine feast full of welcome and joy then you say, thank you. But if you think you created the table and the food that sits on it, if you think you've been ordained to control and command the people who serve you, then it's nearly impossible to know the wonder of God's grace.

I wonder what our country would look like if we all thought of ourselves as guests of a Master who set a table with food watered by rains we did create, grown in ground we didn't form, land divided into property by human, not divine designs. I wonder what our city would look like if we all believed that God's love for each and everyone of us was not an entitlement, but a gift – something to marvel over, celebrate and rejoice.

It's that wonder that I sometimes fear has been lost both by rationalists who think everything can be explained and by religionists whose doctrines are so rigid they have no use for a God larger than their ideas. The wonder that led Paul to leave us with flourishing sentences revealing his intuition around God's grace rather than a rigid explanation of it. That wonder that led Aquinas, the great theologian to say at the end of his life "I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings like straw." That wonder that led Jonathan Edwards – an early opponent of predestination - to reflect after a contemplative walk, "there came into my mind, a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express."²

Doug Mendenhall, a journalist and author, tried to express what was at the root of his decision and that of his spouse to adopt their first children into their family of five. "We chose him," Mendenhall writes, "because we knew that he

² I owe these examples to Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009. I tried to arrange the example to include more than male theologians but his one example of Flannery O'Connor's character O.E. Parker from "Parker's Back" was too lengthy and difficult to convey. One of Thuesen's central theses is that because Christians slugged it out over predestination through the years, modern-day evangelicals sought to diminish its core (radical) claims.

needed to be chosen, needed to be loved. We knew nothing about him we knew nothing of who he would become.” 16 years later, the Mendenhalls know a lot more about their son than when they first held him in their arms, but there’s still not a real rationale basis to explain their love. “We love him because we chose him; we chose him because we love him.”³

God’s love is like that. A reality that we can do little more than celebrate and do our best to rearrange our lives not to make ourselves worth, not to make ourselves deserving, but to express our gratitude for these moments, [breathe] for this breath, for the wonder of this earth, these people, this love.

³ Doug Mendenhall, “Rising Above the Low Water Mark of 2013 (Ephesians 1:3-14),” *HuffPost*, December 30, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-mendenhall/rising-above-the-lowwater_b_4519489.html.