

## “Doctrine Talk: Election”

Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-14

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This Sunday we begin a summer series of preaching that will draw on the letter or epistle of Ephesians in the New Testament. Today and for the following six Sundays, we will concentrate on this short work—at times, very practical and down-to-earth and at times lofty and difficult to comprehend. I am not going to address the usual introductory questions of who wrote it, when was it written, why was it written, to whom was it written, how is organized, and so forth. I will do that sort of reflection for the next six weeks during the Sunday School hour in the Chapel for anyone who would like to join in that sort of study. In worship each week, we are simply going to dive into the text. And here is what I am seeking to bring together: the intersection between doctrine and practice, between thought and action, between what we believe and what we do.

This week, I will just read one sentence. One sentence...sounds simple enough, but it goes on for 11 verses. If you follow along in the NRSV as I read it, you will see punctuation to help us to understand the text—I count 6 periods and a semi-colon. However, in the original Greek text is all one sentence. The doctrine that I will highlight and focus is this: God’s choice, God’s election, God’s intentionality.

**Ephesians: 1:3-14:** <sup>3</sup> *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,* <sup>4</sup> *just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.* <sup>5</sup> *He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,* <sup>6</sup> *to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.* <sup>7</sup> *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace* <sup>8</sup> *that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight* <sup>9</sup> *he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,* <sup>10</sup> *as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* <sup>11</sup> *In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,* <sup>12</sup> *so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.* <sup>13</sup> *In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;* <sup>14</sup> *this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.*

Election...God’s choosing...one of the most mysterious and sometimes troubling doctrines of our faith. Listen again to this phrase: “Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.” Chosen...not at our birth but before the foundation of the world! If that troubles your mind a bit, then join the rest of us. How can God have chosen us before we were born? Do we have free will? Are we just puppets? And the questions go on. How can God choose us when it up to us to choose God? Or, is it?

There is a very simple and clear solution to this question. The simple and clear solution is that God knows everything...knows even the choices that you and I will make...knows who will be choose to be for God and will not. The classic way to see this is as follows: picture, if you will a time-line, one of the standard tools in history books. So, for example, a timeline of United States history might

have 1603, the establishment of the first permanent, English-speaking settlement; 1776, the Declaration of Independence; 1789, the approval of the Constitution; 1812, the War of 1812 (that was hard one!); all the way up to 2008 with the election of the first president of African-American descent. Here's the explanation of God's choice: God stands above time and looks at the timeline of all human history. God can see the beginning, middle, and end...just like we do when we look at timeline. It is not really a matter of God choosing us before the foundation of the world...it is just a matter of knowledge, what is called "foreknowledge." God just knows everything and that seems like choice to us.

As H. L. Mencken once reportedly observed, there is a solution to every problem that is clear, simple, and wrong. Wrong may be an overstatement here, but this simple, clear solution is certainly not Biblical. It does not represent the faith of Judaism and the faith of the Church. The God we meet in the Bible chooses. So, for example, God chooses Abraham of Ur—were that not other people as pious and righteous as Abraham! God simply chose. Then there are Jacob and Esau, twin brothers. God chooses one, Jacob, and not the other... and it is not because Jacob was morally better than his brother. Far from it! Then Jacob himself has 12 sons and God chooses the youngest, Joseph. On and on the Old Testament story is that God chooses.

Indeed, the people of Israel understood themselves to be God's chosen people. Out of all the peoples of the world, God had chosen them. If you have ever seen the movie or play, *Fiddler on the Roof*, you may recall that Tevye, the Russian Jewish milkman, wonders why his life is so hard, being a Jew in Russia. He raises his hands to heaven at one point and says, God, if this is what it means to be chosen, how about choosing someone else!

Chosen...not just a matter of foreknowledge but rather intentionality. That's the perspective of the Old Testament...that is certainly the perspective of the New Testament. In those stories that lead up to Jesus' birth, it is clear that Mary and Joseph understood themselves to be "chosen." God picked them. The apostle Paul, whose life and ministry stand behind this letter of the Ephesians, understands himself to be chosen...you may recall, that he was bent on destroying the church before he encounter the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. God chose him.

We Presbyterians sometimes get bad rap about being preoccupied with election or predestination. When someone gives me hard time about being Presbyterian and emphasizing predestination, I just give them a wide-eyed look and say: "We read the Bible...don't you?" We are just being Biblical. The Bible is preoccupied with destiny. Jesus understood his ministry as matter of destiny. God chose him to minister, to teach, heal, and to go to Jerusalem to die. Jesus understood Judas' betrayal as matter of destiny, as part of God's plan. Did Jesus have a choice? Yes. Remember in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, he prayed that this cup, this destiny, be taken away from him. Did Judas have a choice? Yes. He even regretted his choice afterward. But both Jesus' choices and Judas' choices are wrapped up in God's purpose, God's intention, God's choosing.

The doctrine of election, of God's choosing, will not be settled this morning. No, this morning, we will simply take one slice of this doctrine, one of the images of this choosing found in our text today: the action of adoption. God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ.

So, let's consider adoption. Adoption is absolute "planned parenthood". Yes, I know many couple have planned their children, but there is always a bit of probability in the "natural method," isn't there? Ask anyone who has gone through fertility tests about how "natural" it is? Ask anyone who has had miscarriage how fail-safe the planning is. No, adoption is the only absolute "planned parenthood".

Now as most of you know, Sheri and I have an adopted child. She is as much our child as any child born to parents. Adoption is a choice...an intention...a frightening and wonderful experience. And it is filled with choices. Let me tell you about some of the choices.

We had to fill out a form designating our choice. Male...female...optional. That was fairly easy. Then, age: infant, one year old, two...three...four...five. Our daughter was five years old when she blessed up with her presence...because we chose to accept a female child:3 to 5 years old. Gender choice...age choice...those were the easy ones. But then there was front and back form of other conditions that we would or would not accept.

Club foot—well, that repairable by surgery; cleft palate—again, not a deal breaker; heart murmur—lots of children have that. But then came hepatitis...cystic fibrosis...HIV-positive...leukemia...Downs syndrome. This form had to be completed to do the adoption. We had to choose—from condition mild to severe. We had to choose. Adoption is a choice...planned parenthood.

Adoption is a choice...but the way the family life will work out is still to be seen. As the old saying goes, "You can choose your friends; you cannot choose your family." Here is the mysterious plan of God: God chooses...chooses okay people and not-okay people. It is God's choice. When someone asks me about heaven and hell, with the particular underlying question being, "Is so-in-so in hell?", I am very slow to answer. God's choice is not my choice. Next week we will consider the doctrine word "grace." And grace is more radical and difficult than election. To trust in God's grace is to trust that God's good purpose will win out and that it is possible...let me underline "possible"...possible that even God's grace can encompass all. It is possible that when enter the Pearly Gates and are the receiving line of heaven, having a reunion with those dear folks that have gone before us, it is possible that you might be shaking hands with Pol Pot of Cambodia, Joseph Stalin of Russia, Adolph Hitler—all responsible for the deaths of millions. Even that is possible when it comes grace. If you think predestination or election is hard to swallow, then it does even compare to grace! But that's next week.

Today, our focus is on God's election or choice. And our image is adoption, a choice of parents about who will be family. The child may say, "I don't want the family." But the adoption still stands. Isn't that what it means to be family? Even if I were to change my name, renounce all ties, move to another country, I will still be Nelle and Gibbon Pender's son. Even if I hate them...they would still love me. I am their child.

Being family does not mean that you always participate. Again, most every family I know has family members who either by design or accident have distanced themselves from the family. Sometimes it is due to painful experiences—angry words and actions that do not seem to be retractable. Sometimes it is due to those seismic disruptions of families through addiction or mental illness.

Again, one of the privileges of being a pastor is being party to the great divides that pain families.. Likewise, most everyone us here have family and friends that no longer practice the faith that they professed or that grew up in. Perhaps it is where you are now. To have once participated as part of the family of the faith...but no longer. Either the experience with the church was bad or just a matter of drifting away....once part of things but now no longer.

How we long for those far-off to find a community of faith; we worry that they will not. We know that God loves them. We trust that they are still God's children. All too often, the question of God's destiny for us gets narrowed down to whether you are in or out, whether you are saved or unsaved, found or lost. In some ways, this is like defining our lives about what name is on the birth certificate. All that matters is the parenthood information on the birth certificate. As long you have the right family name, you are okay. How sad if that is what it means to be children of God—narrowed down to this...whether you are in or out.

As I said before, I am very reluctant to say who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is unsaved. God's purpose and choices are higher than mine. But what I am sure about is this: what confirms and enriches our family life is not a birth certificate but participation in and with the rest of the family. So we happen to have Russian birth certificate with the name Yulia Rupsova; we have United States issued birth-certificate, with our child's American name. Are they important? You need them for diver's license. But they are finally just piece of paper. Adoption is not a piece of paper but an ongoing experience...and ongoing choice...an ongoing participation.

When I went to Russia to bring our child home 15 years ago, I went to an orphanage in Ekatherinburg. As the adoption took several days to complete, I spent several days at the orphanage awaiting final approval. During these days, I would go out on the playground with all the children. At the orphanage, the children called each female adult caretaker, "Mama," and each male adult caretaker, "Papa". There I was outside on the playground—this strange American on their playground—and I was surrounded by beautiful children. And they all gathered around me...some tucking at my hand and coat. And they cried out, "Papa, Papa, Papa." And I longed to bring them to embrace them all and bring them home with me.

I stay in the church because I know what it is like to be together with God's people and say, Papa, Papa...that's worship. I stay in ministry because I find that the family of God is an ongoing matter of participation and engagement...not because my name is on some book in heaven. I live with this disappointments and hurts of this family life...because...because I am adopted, one of the children of God...and so are you. Chosen from before the foundation of the world.