

Treasures in Christ

Scripture: Galatians 3:21-29

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

(Introduction)

Some years ago.... Judy Wendt....wanting to teach us a spiritual discipline introduced us to the method of pulling out key phrases from the Bible. She began with Ephesians chapters 1-3 and the phrase "in Christ". She was a wise woman for as young mothers she knew we would be strengthened in our role if we better understood our own identity. The lesson was basic – simply find all the phrases with the statement, "in Christ" and learn about who the Word of God says we are.

That was 16 years ago and I have performed this exercise every few years since then. The last time I did so was this past summer when I re-discovered 30 references to my inherited identity in Christ. When I first started doing this I was a new Christian and as some of us can be when we first fall in love, I did not question anything and simply enjoyed the references. As the years went by I became more aware of my own doubts and through honest work and reflection I realized that there were things that I had learned and memorized intellectually, but had difficulty believing intellectually and with my heart. And there were places where what I believed in my mind and what I felt were not lining up. So I began asking God to help me identify these and asked Him to help me believe more with my heart. This process has been formative for me and has helped me through challenging times.

Today, I would like to take some time to celebrate our identity in Christ and the treasures that lie within as Paul wrote about in his letter to the Ephesians. I hope to encourage you to make your own list and ponder who you are "in Christ". I will talk some about the different ways we can experience knowing. And I will finish with some thoughts about what Paul wanted us to experience in this knowing.

(Point 1: Knowledge)

So, if we are to begin a process of gaining knowledge it may help to first ask some questions about knowledge itself. What does it mean for us to know something?

We experience knowing in different ways: intellectually and woven deep into our being. The Greek language differentiates the various ways we experience knowledge through three different words. Today I will focus on two.

The first is the word, *epignosis*. According to Strong's concordance, it means to think to be true. It contains the concept of placing one's trust in a thing. Most precisely, it is the mere acknowledgement of some fact or event. It is intellectual faith. Paul uses this word in the beginning of the first chapter of his letter as he is laying out his argument to the Ephesians. He writes, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparable power for us who *epignosis-believe*."

The second is the word *ginosko*. It means to learn to know or come to know. This is a knowing that comes from experience. It is the word we use for when a man *knows* a woman. It is this knowing that is woven into our being. It is what we mean when we say we know it in our gut. This kind of knowing is so primal that it is almost difficult to defend – it just is. Paul uses it in the 3rd chapter of Ephesians when he writes, "I pray (that you may) *ginosko-know* this love that surpasses knowledge."

An example of this is, I *ginosko-know* my children are the most precious children in the world. I believe this in my heart. It is deep in my gut in a way that means that I would instinctively step into harms way to protect them. This knowing – just – is. At the same time, I also understand that while you may be fond of my children, you do not believe that they are the most precious children in the world. Rather, you have relationships with children you think are the most precious in the world. Thus, intellectually, I must come to the conclusion, sorry kids, that I *epignosis-know* that my children are, in fact, not the most precious children in the world even as I love them more deeply than other children.

So, as we spend some time looking at who we are in Christ, I ask you, where can you celebrate and accept your identity and where do you struggle to *epignosis-believe* and *ginosko-believe*?

Let our prayer be like that of the father of the boy with seizures who, when told by Jesus that anything is possible for him who believes, replies, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."

(Point 2: Identity in Christ)

The scripture verse today from Galatians promises an inheritance in Christ for all who have faith. Our identity is a gift from God through our faith. In Christ, we are so much more than we can imagine. When we work to believe we are who God says we are, we can be filled with joy and hope and we are empowered to both give and receive forgiveness, mercy and grace.

I mentioned earlier I've found many descriptions of our identity and for today we will look at just a few. These are precious things. Gifts. Treasures. And as such, I've asked some volunteers to come and unwrap them and read then to you.

"I am chosen"

"I am rich in God's grace"

"I am a fellow citizen with all God's people"

"I am able to approach God with freedom and confidence"

"I am holy and blameless"

These precious treasures are yours in Christ. No person, event or action can take them away from you. In a sea of stress, temptation, successes, failures – these are a constant. No matter what anyone on earth calls you, no one gets to name who you eternally are, except Abba God.

(Point 3: Unity in Christ)

Now, I'm going to ask for your participation. There is power in speaking things aloud. I am going to ask you to read these treasures together. So, wherever you are on your faith journey with Christ, please read (slide) these with me.

I thank you God, that:

"I am chosen"

"I am rich in God's grace"

"I am a fellow citizen with all God's people"

"I am able to approach God with freedom and confidence"

"I am holy and blameless"

Now look around you. Obviously, you are not the only one speaking. You share this inherited identity with everyone who spoke or thought these words.

Imagine all in Christ in our community, in our denomination, in the Church as a whole. All those in Christ who have lived, who are living and who will live. Try with your heart and your mind to see all of them reciting this common identity as a praise and prayer of thanksgiving to our creator God.

And even as we just grasp the very edges of this concept we begin to open this most true and wonderful treasure in Christ – and that treasure is the gift of unity.

I am going to ask for your participation again. Doing your best to imagine all who have ever been, all who are, and all who will be in Christ, please join with me in celebrating as we speak these words (next slide):

We thank you God that:

We are all chosen

We are all rich in God's grace

We are all fellow citizens with all God' people

We are all able to approach God with freedom and confidence

We are all holy and blameless

This is what I think Paul was envisioning for us all when he prayed Eph 3:16-19. It is my prayer that you may believe this more and more about yourself, and all people in Christ, both with your intellect and deep in your gut. In the words of Paul, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have the power, together with all God's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Amen