

Reflection on Ephesians 1:1–14
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Everything from “blessed” to the end of the reading we just heard is one sentence in the Greek. It reads like a stream of unconsciousness, an outpouring of spiritual phrases and dense theology. For this reason, it might be tempting to skim over it, to jump forward into the letter in search of something we can hang our hats on.

When I first outlined this series, this is what I did. I planned to begin with verse 15. But the more I read, studied and lived with this letter, the more I sensed we would do well to begin where Paul begins—with God’s grace lavishly poured out, and to wonder what this run-on sentence might have to do with being the church.

In his reflections on this sentence, Eugene Peterson says Paul’s poetry opens us up to a world that is vast and spacious. Divine involvement in history stretches from the creation of the earth into an infinity we cannot fathom. God’s activity encompasses the unexplored cosmos beyond the skies to the depths below the waves of the sea and everything in between. Peterson writes:

The sheer size, the staggering largeness, of the world into which God calls us, its multi-dimensioned spaciousness, must not be reduced to dimensions that we are cosily comfortable with. Paul does his best to prevent us from reducing it. Paul stretches us. he counters with holy poetry. If we calculate the nature of the world by what we can manage or explain, we end up living in a very small world. If we are going to grow to the mature stature of Christ, we need conditions favourable to it. We need room. (buying school uniform too big) The Ephesians letter gives us room, dimensions deep and wide, and we come up gasping for air. This is going to take some getting used to.

In other words, Ephesians is going to point us beyond mere functionality as a church. This letter casts a vision for Christian community that is deeper and wider than what we are doing, the programs and activities of the church in its local expression. In Ephesians, we will have our attention drawn to the universal, the mysterious, the sacred communion woven into the earth by Christ who is in all and through all. Or, as the Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union* puts it, “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” that by its very being professes Jesus as “Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.”

So, as we take our first steps into this letter, what are we to make of the horizon that is set before us in Paul's introduction? What might bring this vast universe a little closer to the ground where we actually live? Well first, I hear Paul affirm that *God* is the prime-mover, the initiator of what Rowan Williams calls a "dependable relationship." God is *the* "Other" who will never leave us nor forsake us.

It seems that what plagues so many of us is the desire to be desired. We long to be noticed, affirmed and befriended. It's as though we never leave that line-up against the gymnasium wall or on the boundary line of the oval where we, as children, waited to be chosen for someone's team during recess or gym class.

Some of us might remember even now the feelings this situation invoked in us. *We want to be chosen. We want to belong, to know we have worth and that we matter.* Paul reminds us that "before the foundation of the world," we were *already chosen* to be "holy and blameless before God in love."

In the Greek, this phrase is not so much a statement about our moral condition. Of course we are not really holy and blameless! Rather, it is a statement of deep truth. The sense of it is that in the gaze of God—a gaze that is altogether merciful—we are entirely lovable and completely accepted *just as we are*. I think parents and grandparents can understand something of this gracious gaze.

One fruit that comes from a maturing faith, then, is a greater belief and resting in this love. Individually and as a community, we rely less and less on our own capabilities and achievements for a sense of worth, and trust instead our lived experiences of the grace that has been lavishly poured out on us. There is less need to prove ourselves, less effort put into gaining attention and an increasing gratitude for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Which brings us to a second affirmation I hear in Paul—the purpose of Christian community. Paul says that in Jesus, we have come to know the mystery of God's will, "the plan" as he calls it, "for the fullness of time," which is "to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth." In the Greek, the word which is translated as "gather" holds within it the image of a head. God's will is to bring everything together into a harmonious body with Christ as the head.

The Body of Christ is the prevailing image of the church for Paul and one we will hear much about in coming weeks. But even now, in Paul's first longwinded sentence, there is much we might apply to our community here at St. Andrew's. For instance:

If in the loving gaze of God we are seen as lovable, what might this suggest to us about one another? How might our growing awareness of God's grace for ourselves encourage a graciousness in our gaze of others?

The Body of Christ is not without its blemishes. Anyone who comes to it with wishful thinking or idealisms of any sort will soon be disappointed and most likely be on their way looking for grass they think will be greener. Learning to love in mature, Christlike ways is demanding and we are often enlarged and refined by community.

So, rather than expecting it to be otherwise or satisfying ourselves with polite denial, we do well to acknowledge the challenges, to God in prayer. Praying about the situations that arise and praying for all those involved—whatever form this prayer might take—usually reveals avenues for growth and, with time, leads us to genuinely loving actions and sincere gratitude for those in our midst.

Aside from this somewhat personal application, there is also a timely word for the community as a whole. There is an acknowledgement here that the church at its best lives from places of depth and spirit, allowing for its ways and actions to rise from the cosmic flow of Christ within all things.

Yes, there are important material and structural realities that need our good attention. But sometimes these aspects can overwhelm our time and attention. Sometimes it can feel like the tail is wagging the dog! This has become more apparent to some of us because of the pandemic experience.

A visceral example happened last year when we were in the middle of the COVID blur. Local congregations were attending as well as we could to what felt like an ever-changing landscape. We were adapting as we went, finding new ways to worship God and care our community. The experience on the ground for many is that local congregations were thriving as we responded compassionately, freely to matters at hand with genuine faithfulness and love. (touching something of the universal)

Then, in June 2020, all of us received a Building Safety Report from the Synod. Ours was twenty-pages of fine-print detailing the state of our property and designating projects in need of our urgent attention using a red light, yellow light, green light system. Now I don't wish to speak dismissively about other Councils of the Church. But it felt like such a disconnect given the COVID experience we were having at the time.

Our duty of care and need to create safe spaces and ensure behaviour that measures up to codes of conduct *can be* expressions of love. The grand buildings and matters of administration *can enable* us to bear witness to God. But such things can also distract us from the essence of our calling. They do not in-and-of-themselves automatically promote in us that harmonious cooperation with Christ who is the head nor do they guarantee real love toward one another.

How do we keep a needed priority and perspective? How do we give due diligence through a lens of the cosmic Christ and the universal Church of which Paul so enthusiastically sings?

To this end, I wonder if the architecture of ancient Ephesus may provide a concrete vision for the church in our time to ponder. As the budding community in Ephesus began to take shape on the fringes of the city, the centre piece in their gathering space was the baptismal pool that mirrored in its very form the death and resurrection of Jesus—three steps down and three steps up.

This first building has turned to dust and the majestic Church of Mary that came afterwards lies in ruins, but the baptismal pool from the first century remains, offering testimony. It holds our attention on what, in the end, is the defining mark of the church's faith and practice—our ongoing participation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is a grand vision, much, much larger than any one congregation or generation can realise. We will always be fumblers and stumblers along the way, yet equally upheld by grace. So like light sparkling on the horizon, this vision is our hope, the calling to which we have been called. May it capture our hearts, hold our attention amidst competing demands and make clear, always, our reason for being.