

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.11.21

Ephesians 1:3-14

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, 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, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up **all things in him**, things in heaven and things on earth. 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, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might **live for the praise of his glory**. 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; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Ivanka Demchuk is a Ukrainian artist, a maker of religious icons. I have several of her productions. [This is the one that otherwise hangs on] *The one that's currently hanging on* the wall of my Zoom room is "Hidden Life in Nazareth." [As you can see] It features Joseph and Mary and a toddling Jesus, as if just learning to walk. Laundry, dries, wind-lifted, on the line in the background, and a table and chairs are still further back with a game spread out and some crayons, some tools, maybe Joseph's. Joseph stands, having just let go of Jesus who toddles away from him. The little one's arms are up over his head the way, when learning to walk, you find your balance—which suggests there's something common about this boy, common about this experience. These people could be any of us. Mary kneels with her arms opened wide, the destination of the little one. It's almost certain that he will move toward that love. But maybe not.

I bought it because I liked it, simple as that. It wasn't a deeply religious thing, just immediate attraction when I spotted it on the internet.

It actually reminded me of a picture we Goodmans have of Tobias learning to walk, arms up, toddling across the floor of the then empty living room, no furniture yet so the perfect place to practice—Jesse letting him go, me waiting a few feet away, arms open, delight on my face. He was doing it! He was walking!

We actually framed that picture, and in one of those frames that holds two pictures. The other one we put in was of when Jesse was learning to walk, was caught by camera moving toward

his mother, who was, she herself, a few feet away and holding the same posture, kneeling, arms flung open, delighted face.

Huh. Common indeed. And the best thing in the world!

It's like quantum attraction, this. Quantum entanglement, physicists theorize, atoms behaving as if the end pulls the one in movement toward it. (Physicists hate it when we use their stuff. They'd say, "Don't put our theories in your sermons." But I do it anyway.)

You know, we tend to think of cause as what comes *before* effect. We tend to discount the power of the end to hold appeal, and thus to attract—and why shouldn't we? It's so counter-intuitive, to the modern mind at least. We moderns have gone all in with efficient cause and to a lesser degree with material cause. We tend to have forgotten entirely about final cause, to discount formal cause and to have lost all faith in the possibility of final cause.

These are Aristotle's so-called Four Causes, four ways of considering how come—efficient cause, material cause, formal cause, and final cause. How things have come to be, why things are as they are: Aristotle gave us a framework of four, not that I've read much Aristotle, just that I've read people who have.

Efficient cause considers the source of the object's change or stability, the source of an effect that is most immediate, most obvious. Why the table? How come? Because someone built it. That certain someone had the effect of a table. That certain someone caused it.

Material cause considers the materials out of which the occurrence came to occur. Why the table? How come? Because of the wood and the glue. These are the materials that cause the occurrence of this table.

Formal cause considers the forms of the occurrence. Why the table? How come? Because tables have a flat plain and four legs, and that is what this one thing has and is: a flat plain with four legs. The form of "table" gives formal cause to this particular table.

Final cause considers the end or the aim the occurrence serves. Why the table? How come? Because we need a place to set such things as our coffee cups and our books, and so this table, that we might set here our coffee cups and our books. The end of the thing determines the thing—determine meaning of some specific terminus, some particular end. The need of a place to set our coffee cups and books determines the occurrence of a table here.

We moderns have gone all in with efficient cause, the cause that brings us cause and effect, the cause that would have us feel ourselves as active, effective, efficient agents in the world. We moderns really like the feeling of being the source of many and untold occurrences in the world.

We're also good with material causes, the fact of matter which we can study and pull apart and study all the more so to understand, and so to put it together in different ways so to have a different thing. Trees dismantled become wood which becomes tables, or which becomes wood pulp which then becomes less expensive tables.

Formal cause: we resisted that for a while there. We had little use for old forms. We had at least a need to play with old form. So, how about a table with five legs, or a table with no legs, just a plinth, or some other playful way of stabilizing the plain for our coffee cups and our books, or maybe even something not so stable just to push the form to its outer edge of conformity, sloshing coffee, sliding books, a problem only because you had expectation of holding to form, but artisans on the avant-garde don't owe you that. So, now, is this tippy, toppling, wobbly thing: is it even a table?

Final cause: this is where we go dark. Sure, tables can be said clearly to serve a particular end, though that avant-garde artisan is going to press that purpose to its edge. (Sloshing coffee. Sliding books.) But what about things more dynamic than tables? What about things that are alive? What about life? How come these things? Of what final cause are these things? To what final end are we to understand these things—life, your life? What are you for?

We can understand the efficient cause, to a degree. How come you? Evolution, procreation, the fact that your parents had sex.

We can understand the material cause, to an ever-greater degree. How come you? Flesh, blood, bone, air, food, water.

We can understand the formal cause. A person taking the form of the human being. A cow taking the form of cow. A fish taking its form. A fungus taking its form, and then some, and then some. (Fungus is weird.)

But what can we say of its final cause? Regarding life, what can say of its point, of its purpose or aim or *terminus* or end? What can we say of it as a signifier, a sign, of something beyond itself, of some ultimate thing to be signified, as an icon might, a sign significant of the ultimate thing to be signified? Truth.

Maybe you don't use icons for your prayer life. I know I never did. But why should I have? I'm a lifelong Protestant, and Protestants don't go for such things. The earliest Protestants would do away with them altogether, in the 16th century, as they cut their way across Europe. Where icons weren't burned (in bonfires of the vanities) they were banned. Seen as idols, the icon as a sign of the ultimate thing to be signified was lost on literal-minded Protestants. (God love us.

Please.) Of them we could only see their materials, as if the people who used them for worship were worshipping the matter itself, or perhaps were worshipping the artisan who formed the matter into image. Of them, we could only see their material cause, or their efficient cause, completely missing their being signs, signifiers of that final cause, that ultimate one to be signified. Our bad. Sorry about that.

Because, turns out icons quite useful. They're quite illuminating. I love this one in particular, a picture of life in the world, from starting point to aim, from origin to end. Beginning in the father's embrace, now let go to go, but with a clear terminus that attracts by appeal, a clear destination, another loving embrace. Free will is what we do in the meantime, wandering toddlers all. But there's little doubt in the icon where that wandering one is headed, will end up, call it destined if you will, as the writer of the Letter to Ephesians indeed did, in that one very long sentence, which gives us a lot to go on. The destiny is too appealing for that wandering little one to end up anywhere but in that loving embrace.

This is, we might confess, the final cause for us all—the thing for which we were made.

But no! We can't say that. We shouldn't even ask the question—or so say some modern philosophers, for there is no final cause, which is to say there is no point. Life doesn't have a point or an aim or an end. It just *is*—so to ask after its final cause, to ask after its ultimate point, is to ask an absurd question.

It's like a meme I saw—a side-by-side picture, duplicated, a swimming shark. One version of the picture has a harmonica photoshopped onto the shark's mouth, the other version has a harmonica photoshopped in front of its gills. Below was the question, "How does a shark play the harmonica?" which is funny because to take the question you have accept an absurdity, that sharks might play the harmonica, that it's just a matter as to how. But sharks don't play the harmonica, as far as we know and of which, by deducing, we can be fairly certain. So, to ask the question is to embed in the question something silly, making the question one we can't ask in good faith, can only ask as a joke.

Some modernists would say the same goes for asking after the final cause of life or something alive, asking after the ultimate purpose for the existence of this living being. The question assumes an end, a purpose, which is to embed into the question some notion of an ultimate intent and therefore ultimate intender, a mind conceiving of it all, and this is to suggest an ultimate and transcendent creator, let's call it God or Yahweh or the Lord. But this is a silly notion, so say these; this is to assume something known to be false. Some ultimate purpose

suggests a Creator God, which is an absurd suggestion, thus making the question as to final cause or true end absurd, something that can only be asked as a joke.

What comes of this, though, is all sorts of meddlesome stuff. The sorry confession that life serves no purpose opens a way for the lives of living beings to be put to imposed purposes—like economic purposes, which would have us strike upon value based on the marketplace (how much do you get paid? how much do you produce?); or ideological purposes, which would have us animated by myths of nationalism, racism, tribalism, political frameworks; or instrumental purposes, by which however useful we are to someone else, some more powerful entity, defines what we're for.

What we're *for*. The question is either faithful in a creator God, cynical for the purposes of worldly power and values, or absurd.

So, what we're *for*: to ask after final cause is to admit belief in God, while to deny the validity of such a question is to prohibit belief in God. But, look, both are just faith-claims regarding God, both are confessions of faith. And, as all things in the modern era, they must be taken as equally valid. Since equally unproveable, equally notional, they're equal in value so it's really just a matter of our choosing which, which one, which one shall it be for us, which one shall it be for me.

But listen. Listen. There's a difference between these questions deemed invalid because based on absurdities. There's a difference between the shark with the harmonica and a creative God whose purpose is love. And this is it: the one absurdity is imaged in something that doesn't exist; the one has a sign or signifier for something that has no thing signified. There are no sharks that play the harmonica. In spite of the image of it, there is no such thing. So, this signifier has no thing it signifies. It's empty. It's false. But the notion that our aim and end is love, which is imaged in (if nothing else) the icon from my Zoom room, is a sign or signifier of a thing to be signified. Toddlers toddle into arms of love all the time. Tobias did it. Thirty-five years earlier, Jesse did it—and I imagine this is not a comprehensive list. I imagine others have done it too, thousands, millions of others, countless others. The icon, then, signifies something real, something true in its being an occurrence that occurs across time and place, and therefore might signify something truer still. The icon images a toddler running into a loving mother's arms. The fact of an actual toddler running into an actual loving mother's arms might then also be a signifier of the ultimate to-be-signified—the ultimate end of loving arms, loving embrace. God. The Lord.

So, this my icon. Let's ask of it. How came this toddling Jesus to walk? Because the father let loose the child to go—efficient cause! Because feet and legs, muscle and bone—material cause! Because humans walk and this human (though also God) is coming to take the form of “walk”—formal cause. And because that open embrace now drawing the one to its loving end—final cause. Indeed, perhaps mostly because that open embrace, that delighted face, drawing the toddler to its true aim and full end—almost as if pre-determined, almost as if its end was the whole point even from the beginning and even before the beginning, such that the beginning had to be in order to reach the true aim and full end.

So, the creation. Let's ask of it. Why? How come? Because love. It had to come to be because love.

So, now you. Let's consider you. Made, you may go. Released of your father's holding, now you may go and go and go, and you will return to embrace because embrace is your end, love is your end. Whether going near or far, whether going deep and wide and long or short and straight, you may go and go and go, and you will end in loving embrace. This is your destiny—love. This is the thing to which you are predestined—love. This is you predetermined, the *terminus* decided for you before the beginning—love. Whatever you do in the meantime is the playing field of free will. But always is your end—love, in the words of the Letter to the Ephesians living eternal in the praise of glory.

Broccoli. As a mother, I was determined that the kids would have a healthy diet. They could have sweets, too. We would keep cookies in the snack drawer, have sweet cereal sometimes for breakfast. We would also have broccoli at dinner, if nothing more ambitious than that. Broccoli is easy to find in every produce aisle, easy to store in the fridge, easy to prepare, whether raw or steamed or sauteed, whether with butter or cheese or ranch dressing dip. Jack was my fighter—age three, age four, age five and on. And so, I would tell him, “You are going to have broccoli at this meal. You can fight me, I will win, and then you will have broccoli. Or you could just have broccoli.” It was 50/50 as to which it would be.

Heaven, the kingdom of God, our living for the praise of God's glory, isn't broccoli. It's better than that, a lot better—and I say this as someone who likes broccoli. You will have life amidst the kingdom of God. Relentless is God's love—relentless and appealing and ultimately irresistible. You can fight it, God will win, and then you will be amidst God's reign, this kingdom of love. Or you could simply find life amidst God's reign, this sovereignty of love. How much time

have you got? How long are you willing to go before love becomes consciously, decisively your aim and end, before it then becomes your practice, your daily habit?

If you're weighing that last question, then take it from me that life is better the sooner you let that in. Don't wait to have died before you let love transform your life. Don't even wait until you're dying, or even really old, before you let love turn on its head your way of living. Augustine of Hippo, "St. Augustine," is famous for having said to the God whom he'd rather suddenly come to know, "Lord, make me chaste, just not yet." As an older man of faith, though, he finally realized, "Love and do what you will." See, he'd realized there's no difference between the love of God and the fulfilling of your heart's desire. "Love and do what you will." Free will amounts to freely choosing what God freely offers—love.

The excerpt from the Letter to the Ephesians, this which doubled as both our Call to Worship today and our scripture reading, is one sentence. It's but one sentence, in the Greek original anyway.

It also probably wasn't written by Paul, though that's disputed, for what it's worth. It has some different vocabulary than what is typical of Paul. It also doesn't have a specific purpose behind the writing, which Paul usually had for his letters. He seems usually to have written because some issue, so conflict had arisen in the congregation he'd then address or in the region he'd then address. The Corinthians had their problems, which Paul addressed in his several letters to them. The Roman church had a lot to work through. Philemon was about a problem between two specific people, Philemon and Onesimus. But this Letter to the Ephesians seems to serve just some final purpose, that the people know God, and know themselves to have been adopted into God's family and God's purpose, so made inheritors of God's love and grace, chosen from the beginning for this true end, created for a fullness of time and for God's good pleasure, when at last, at long last, there shall be a gathering up of all things for the praise of his glory.

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians wanted the Ephesians to know this, wanted perhaps all his audience to know this, to know this as regards all all things, all things in heaven and on earth.

Living in the praise of God's glory: that feeling at Tanglewood at the end of a concert when all you can do is jump up and applaud? That feeling at Jacob's Pillow at the end of a performance when all you can do is jump up and applaud? That feeling at Fenway when some kid catches a homerun ball in the distant stands and all you can do is jump up and applaud, or at the Olympics when Simone Biles does something astonishing, or when that girl wins the national spelling bee

and then does that little happy spin of surprise? That's the feeling of forever for which you're destined.

So when would you like to start?

Thanks be to God.