

25 July 2021  
Psalm 8; Ephesians 2:1-10  
God's Work of Art  
First Mennonite Church

Last week we read and reflected on Ephesians 1:3-14, one sentence with more than 200 words. I noted how this sentence pointed to God's strategic plan for

all history and creation found in Ephesians 1:10: God 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* (Ephesians 1:10). God's plan is to unite all things, gather all things, and reconcile all things. **All things** is the Greek way of saying **everything**—people, water, animals, plants, insects, air, rocks—everything in the cosmos will be gathered up by God, reconciled and restored to how God intended it at the dawn of creation.

The section we won't read in this sermon series is 1:15-23. Like the previous section of vs 3-14, these 9 verses from vs 15 to -23 also comprise one long sentence. While vs 3-14 was a sentence of 203 words, the sentence in vs 15-23 is a mere 99 words! And these words are directed at the believers in Ephesus, reminding them of the exalted position of the resurrected Jesus as evidence of God's power, the same power that is at work in our lives and in the church as it engages the powers of this world.

I'm going to resist saying anything more about this word **power**, because once we get to Ephesians 6, and the graphic images of Christians going to battle with the principalities and powers, much more can, and will be said.

Suffice it to say, that many of us may wonder where the evidence of God's power in today's Church is. Just think of how many times Christians gossip, say mean things about others, abuse the power we have, are arrogant, and I could go on. Sadly, these sorts of behaviours occurred not just Ephesus or Corinth but continue to occur in the church today, even here in Saskatoon.



But God isn't squeamish about being in company with us. It's not our striving to be good, our desire to be morally perfect that defines us. No. What defines us is our turning to Christ, our trust, our public confession of faith done at baptism that confirms our identity as a child of God, of who we truly are, and who we belong to.

Ephesians 1: 3-14 was one long sentence in Greek, and so was Ephesians 1:15-23. Ephesians 2:1-7 is also one sentence in Greek, albeit a shorter one compared to those in chapter 1. Here in chapter 2, Paul moves on to rehearse who we were before our baptism and who we are becoming by the grace and power of God.

A few years ago, I listened eagerly as Professor Tom Yoder Neufeld spent several days here in SK talking about the book of Ephesians with Mennonite pastors. I was inspired as he talked about the vision of the church and God's plan of salvation for the world.

One reason his talks were so inspirational was that he didn't shy away from speaking about the current state of the church—the quarrelling, the in-fighting, the polarisation, the decline in church attendance. But he didn't end there because that would be rather depressing; rather, he looked for signs of God working in the church and in the world and encouraged us to do the same.

He said it's hard for us to conceptualize the church as a new creation, so he showed us video which he described as a parable to help us understand what God's workshop looks like. I took note of it. In my research for today's sermon, I found it in a BBC news story. The video is called, **Meet the tyre sculptor of Lagos**. Some of you may find it hard to understand the person's English, so I encourage you to read the sub-titles.

Watch video <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-47817690>

Have you ever thought of yourself as recycled material? Tom Yoder Neufeld invites us to image God as an artist who searches for what the world considers useless, gathers it together, and cuts, trims, shapes, and fashions something beautiful. When I watched the video, I immediately thought of the passage in 1 Corinthians where it says, "God chose what is foolish in the world." God gathered a bunch of nobodies and raised them/us together with Christ for good works.

In Ephesians 2:10, the Greek word Paul uses to describe who we are in Christ is **ποίημα (poiēma)**. It's where we get the English word, poem from. One way to translate this verse could be, we are God's poem. That's another wonderful image of us and the church, isn't it?

The NRSV, the translation the worship leader read from, puts it this way: "for we are what [God] has made us." Now, that's an okay phrase. Nothing wrong with "for we are what [God] has made us." I just think it's a bit boring and incredibly under-whelming. Almost like your child graduated from university with perfect marks, 100%, and you told your friends, "Yeah, my child managed to pass all her courses." Other translations offer up better images: the KJV says we are God's **workmanship**. The NIV says, we are God's **handiwork**. I prefer the Jerusalem Bible's translation: we are God's **work of art**.

Don't believe me? Reflect on these photos for a moment.



Not just the human world but the rest of creation as well.



When I watch people or stand outside in my backyard on a summer's night and gaze up into the night sky, I'm in awe of God's artistry! God, the artist of the new creation! Or as our bulletin image shows, God, the Potter of the new creation? So, I really like the image of a sculptor turning tyres into art as a parable of how God is working with us and crafting something beautiful!

We will return to the art part a little later, but let's now look at the first part of Ephesians 2 and to see how Paul arrived at the place where he could call us and the church God's work of art.

In our text this morning, Paul presents the pattern of salvation in language full of worship and celebration. He expands on the claim in the previous chapter that the power that raised Christ from the dead is for us. Vs 1-3 are all about the power of sin, and vs 4-10 are about God's solution to the human condition.

The first three verses of chapter two are an honest and accurate assessment of humanity's rebellion against God. Here Paul describes sin in terms of a spirit who now works in "those who are disobedient" (Eph 2:2). Paul implies that those who are spiritually "dead" live in a different sphere or realm where they conduct themselves by the agency of an evil spirit.

Paul uses the word, **following**, which, in Greek is *peripatew* (per-ee-pat-eh'-o). Our Bibles sometimes translate this word as **following** or as **walking**. A graphic way of describing humanity without Christ as the walking dead. It's used metaphorically and pertains to the orientation of one's life. To be dead then, implies that life that has ceased to be empowered by or rooted in relationship with God.

Paul reminds his audience that they were once *peripatew*-ing, that is, walking according to "the course of this world" (NRSV; ESV). The phrase, **the course** in Greek is *aeon*, and it's often translated as "way" or "course". I think the best way to understand this Greek phrase is of following a power or force that isn't Christ, and being beholden, shaped, and even captured by it.

This power or force is like a spider's web. Even though a web is soft and subtle because it's made of silk, it's also extremely stretchy and strong. This kind of silk acts like Velcro, sticking to the legs and bristles of insects, trapping them so they can't escape. The power of sin also traps us.



Everything in the world is affected. We are all sinners because we are all captured, controlled by this power that is greater than our own will. Paul is not saying that those under this worldly power or force are incapable of doing good apart from Christ. No. What Paul is saying is that there is nothing in this world that isn't in the grip of, isn't touched, infected, tainted, or captured by this power. Our intellect, our motives, our emotions, our will, our relationships—everything is tainted by the power of sin.

There are some theologies that say humans are inherently evil and morally rotten. I remember when I was a child and singing that one old gospel hymn which goes like this:

Alas, and did my Saviour bleed?  
And did my Sovereign die?  
Would He devote that sacred head  
For such a worm as I?

I'll go on record as saying that I don't agree with this kind of theology. Even those living apart from Christ are not worms. Everyone is still beautiful in God's eyes, for God is like the artist who can see our potential, views us as creatures created a little lower than the angels.

Because of the web of sin, we are the walking dead who at the basic level cannot help ourselves; thus we need God's intervention.

**But God.** These two words begin vs 4. Not only were we the walking dead, but God...made us alive together with Christ. **But God**, arguably the two most important words in all of Ephesians. Not only do these words shift our focus away from the hopelessness of the power of sin over the created order, but they set us

up for the surprise of grace. Where we should have expected wrath (2:3), we (you and me) experience the wealth of God's mercy and great love.

**But God...** Made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places. What surprising action the main verbs of this sentence attribute to God! In Ephesians 1:20, the writer exclaimed that God raised up Jesus. Now he exclaims that God's action extends to us! What does the phrase *But God...made us alive with Christ* mean? Thomas Slater thinks that it may refer to Jesus's resurrection, our conversion, or our baptism—or to all three. Tom Yoder Neufeld suggests that the word “with” links us not only with Jesus's resurrection, but also with each other as we experience new life together.

I'm not sure you noticed, but Paul connects our experience of God's grace not with the cross, but with the resurrection. It's good to remember that Ephesians doesn't talk much about the cross but rather focusses on the resurrection. The emphasis on resurrection reminds us of Easter—that we are an Easter people—who are called to live in the resurrection everyday no matter where we are. We live out the values of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

Paul also implies that our salvation is so complete that we are already seated with Christ in heavenly places. I think what Paul means here is since God has liberated us, our eventual victory over the powers that bind us is assured, even though it's not yet complete.

Finally, verses 8 to 10, speak of the basis of salvation as grace and the purpose of salvation as good works. The phrase, “by grace you have been saved, through faith” refers not to our own faith or how strong our faith is, but rather on the faithfulness of Jesus. It's the faithfulness of Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection, that has saved us.

Salvation is the gift of God. It's not the result of works so that no one should boast. By works, Paul means any effort on our part to win God's approval or establish a credit balance in the heavenly ledger. Paul rejects all human efforts to save ourselves, emphasizing instead God's astounding gift of unmerited favour to us. Our good works are just a response to what God has done for us. You see, friends, we do good deeds, not because we hope to get a reward, get showered with blessings. But we do good works because that is what it means to be a Christian. We are in a relationship with Christ. We don't do good works so that

we will be Christian; we do good works because we are Christian. It makes all the difference in the world.

Verse 10 makes another astonishing claim—*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* As I said before, the phrase, *For we are what he has made us* is translated in different ways. We are God's workmanship (says the NIV), God's handiwork (says the NEB), God's work of art (says the Jerusalem Bible). God is like an artist. God has looked on us with mercy, seen our potential, and recycled us to make something beautiful.

So, God gets full credit when we live the way of life God created us to live—not just doing deeds, but fully participating in God's work of reconciling enemies, healing the broken, working to make things right, and bringing light where there is darkness. It's participating with God's work in the world in keeping with the way God has shaped each one of us. How remarkable is this! How different from being in the clutches of the evil one.

This is the pattern of salvation: In Christ, a merciful God liberates rebellious human beings from the clutches of evil so that we can live righteously. Our works are the means of living out God's grace.

I will end my sermon with a quote from NT Wright, a New Testament scholar from the UK. This is what he says about doing good works:

“What you do in the present – painting, singing, sewing, praying, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour – will last into God's future... They are part of building for God's kingdom. Every act of love, gratitude and kindness; every work of art or music; every minute spent teaching a child; every act of care and nurture, for one's fellow human beings or for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; every prayer, every deed that builds up the church, or embraces holiness – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.”<sup>1</sup>

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*