



“A Child of God”

***Cheryl Fields Tyler
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, July 12, 2009
Ephesians 1:3–14 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

Cheryl Fields Tyler

One way to think about the New Testament is that the Gospels provide four perspectives offered to us to help us to understand Jesus, but the rest of the New Testament—and especially the so-called “Pauline letters”—are all about how we are to understand ourselves in relationship to the one the Gospels bear witness to.

As we look at the New Testament through that lens, it’s important to see that each of these “books” in the New Testament is sort of like a little portal into a moment in time, a place, a people, and a culture. It helps me to think about this metaphor. Imagine a movie, one that you’d consider a masterpiece in some way. I’m going to use the movie “Out of Africa”—we just watched that movie at our house this weekend with the kids, and while I’d seen it many times, I’d forgotten how beautiful it was. Are you familiar with it? And because it is inspired by a true story, it works even better for a metaphor.

So imagine seeing that movie not as a whole, but in fragments—the scene of Karin Blixen’s arrival in Africa by train, the image of her meeting the Kikuyu chief, her cross-country trek with supplies for the British army, her flight over the Kenyan plains with Denys Finch Hatten, her words at a graveside as the Masai warrior stands on the horizon.

Each of these scenes has meaning in and of themselves. But stitch them together and a larger story emerges, a story that has not just narrative power but also meaning I can relate to in my own life. Now think not of the movie but pull back from the movie and see the actual people and events that inspired it—the reality of Karin’s courage, loneliness, and stubborn independence, the hierarchy and prejudice of the larger society that constrained her choices, the wildness and otherness of the Africa frontier, the tragedy of the colonial empire mentality and what it meant for indigenous people, the reality of loss, death, and despair and indomitable spirit of those that live on in spite of it. Now, pull back even further and think about the ones who crafted this story

for us—their desire to inspire us, to challenge our assumptions, to move us to reflection, to take us somewhere in time and space that we would not be able to go, their drive to create, to do their art, and the enormous investment of their time, talent, and money to bring us 2 hours and 40 minutes of a reality we otherwise wouldn't know.

Now consider the New Testament in this way—the fragments of a story we get by reading each book, each of which has meaning in and of themselves. But, stitch them together and see the larger story that emerges—the larger story of a man who transformed lives beyond the grave, the courage and fortitude of his followers, the way boundaries and allegiances change because of his message to them, the way they love one another, what they hope for, what they cling to in the midst of suffering.

But, pull back even further and see what this story means in its context. The story of a new definition of community being created, radical in that it was not a community framed by place, or ruler, or ethnicity, or tribe but a community formed by a shared faith, a story that shows the possibility of common ground between people who otherwise knew no common ground, a story that shows the possibility of living fully both our human and soul identity concurrently, our divine and human natures both fully realized and explored.

When we look at the Letter to the Ephesians as one of these snippets in a much larger story in a much larger context, what we see is that the early church is dealing with the realization that despite the apostle's fervent admonition and Paul's subsequent keep-the-faith-encouragement, Jesus wasn't coming back to create an earthly reign. Most scholars agree that Ephesians is not written by Paul—and indeed despite its name, it's not even a letter addressed to the church as Ephesus. It's more likely sort of "open letter" not to a specific congregation, but to all the Pauline churches, and specifically the Gentile churches. It is strikingly different in literary style from the letters that are known to be most certainly from Paul's own pen. It borrows heavily from other Pauline writings, particularly the letter to the Colossians, but offers subtle and some not-so-subtle reinterpretations of Paul's ideas. It includes some of the New Testament's most timeless concepts—for example, Ephesians 2:8 "for by grace you have saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not the result of works but of faith". It also includes some of the New Testament's most time-bound embarrassments, for example, Ephesians 6:5 where the writer exhorts "slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling," the passage most-often used by Southern preachers to justify slavery in the United States.

Whether we look at the sublime or the ridiculous parts of Ephesians, most scholars think that it is a late first-century or early second-century attempt to update and apply Paul's ideas, using a literary form that Paul was noted for. It was likely put together by an ardent follower or followers of Paul well after his death, and attempts to re-state the fundamental tenets of Paul's theology. It continues the move from a more Jewish belief about the literal and urgent return of Christ in a time and place to a more Greek

and Gentile exposition of what it means for individuals to live out of a Christian identity as we see Jesus less as a Jewish leader and more and more in a timeless, cosmic context. It is an expression of the changes in the Christian Church as it moves from witnesses who knew—at least second hand—an earthly Jesus who inspired ardent Jewish followers of a purported Jewish Messiah to a Cosmic Christ who has a totally different definition of “the chosen people.” It speaks to our fundamental identity as “children of God” not by tribe or birth or even goodness, but by grace and through faith.

Think about that: faith that changes your very identity. Faith that asserts that beyond time, place, context, and culture you are God’s own child. You are not an orphan. You are not on the outside looking in. No, you are known, you are lavishly loved, you are tenderly held. You are at home.

But wait: you are not alone. “Me” is also a “we”. We are God’s children. We all are lavishly and tenderly loved and held by God. We all are known. We are not only not orphans, we are not only children . . . we have brothers and sisters. Grace includes you in the family, faith sets you a place at the table, love makes a banquet of plenty and then some.

So how would the world be different if we all—indeed if all people—could live out the truth of that identity?

Tom, Sage, Maya, and I just got back from a week in D.C. over July 4th. We went with friends and we had a great time—there’s so much to do, so much to see, so much to learn, so much to enjoy. It was a particularly good time to go—the city was abuzz with the July 4th celebrations and the kids had just wrapped up a year-long U.S. history course that had them correcting their parents regularly on the specifics of U.S. history.

You can’t see the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights without being impressed with the forethought and insight of our founders. And you can’t visit Mount Vernon, the Lincoln Memorial, Gettysburg, and walk through the American History museum and the Capitol without seeing that there is something absolutely core to the American identity captured in the first lines of the Declaration of Independence that we have been trying to figure out how to live up to since the words were penned in 1776. Hear them again: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

With even just a cursory look at U.S. history, you can tell that we have been at our best when living out of that identity—and at our worst when we have allowed ourselves leeway to apply these words only to the few and not to all.

I left D.C. with a renewed sense of patriotism and pride in our national identity and a renewed sense of humility about how hard it is to live up to our ideals, and how very important it is to do so, especially when it's hard.

But, as deep as my identity as an American is, it is bound by time, and place, and culture—and it is an identity that has with it the possibility that some may be excluded from its benefits.

But I have an even deeper identity as a child of God. This is the identity that goes beyond the time and place of my birth . . . that goes beyond my feeble attempts to live out my divine birthright. It is who I am in my truest self. And when I operate from that identity, I know you not as the stranger from another land, tribe, or time—I know you as my family, as my kin.

I'm left to ponder this morning: What identity am I living out of in my day-to-day life? How am I holding myself in relationship to God? How am I holding you in relationship to God? How am I holding you in relationship to me?

My friends, indeed my brothers and sisters in Christ, know your true identity this morning as a Child of God. Know your kinship with one another, with all people and indeed with all creation. Know your inheritance, the gift of grace in this life and beyond it, a wealth of love, and peace and hope that goes beyond understanding, that goes beyond death.

Praise be to God, our mother, our father, parent to us all. Amen.