

January 5, 2025 - Ephesians 1:3-14

There are many different ways of saying, "I love you." Years ago, there was an entire book written about the subject. Gary Chapman's "The Five Love Languages" has become a staple of pop psychology. Quickly going from a Christian marriage counseling tool to a concept embraced by the secular world too. He defines the five love languages as words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service, and physical touch.

But even if you restrict it to just simple words, there are differences. The way I say I love you to my wife is different than the way I say love you to my daughter, which is also different than the way I say I love you to my mother or my sisters. And the way I say I love you to my wife when I'm leaving for work or saying goodnight is different than the way I say I love you after she's just comforted me after a hard day or after she's just done something incredibly kind and generous for me that I greatly appreciated.

It's just three words. And yet, they can be said in so many different ways and for so many different reasons. That's true when it comes to people saying, "I love you," to other people. But it's also true when it comes to God saying, "I love you," to us. And that's really St Paul's point in our Epistle lesson today.

This passage is written in a very specific style of Jewish prayer known as a *berekah*. We see another example of this exact format in Daniel 2, actually. *Berekah* is just the Hebrew word for "blessing," which is the first word of the prayer and it is a distinctive feature of it. Because a *berekah* is all about blessing God for the blessings that he has given to us.

And you can see that right in the very first verse. "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us...*" And then the rest of the prayer is all about what God has done for us.

And so the whole premise of the prayer is that the only way you can bless God is by recounting what he has done. What we have done is meaningless. It is filthy rags. A pile of dung. No matter how good we may think our works are, they are worthless and tainted with sin in God's eyes. The only good thing we can bring before God is those good things which he has done for us.

This is actually a fundamental premise for all Lutheran worship. It is the reason why we use scripture to form the basis for all our liturgy. It is why we say the creed and the Lord's Prayer in every service. It is why we use the Words of Institution to consecrate the Lord's Supper.

Because the Word of God is the only good thing we have to give to God. The confession of who God is and what he has done for us in the Creed is the only good thing we have to give to God. The prayer that Jesus taught us and the words that he spoke to us on the night when he was betrayed are the the only good thing we have to give to God. The whole Lutheran divine service is a *berekah*. It is us blessing God by confessing back to him his blessings to us.

And in this *berekah* that St Paul writes to the Ephesians, his focus is upon those ways in which we see God's love to us. He wants us to see how many different ways God has said, "I love you," to his church. And, in particular, he wants us to see this through a Trinitarian lens. He is showing us how the Father says, "I love you," how the Son says, "I love you," and how the Holy Spirit says, "I love you."

First, the Father has chosen us. And he didn't choose us after we chose him. No, he chose us long, long before we were ever born. In fact, he chose us before the foundations of the world. Before the world was made, before God said, "Let there be light," he was thinking about you. But what was he thinking about? Before the world was made, what had he chosen us for?

Well, he chose us for three incredible blessings. First, he chose to give us every spiritual gift in the heavenly places. What does that even mean? I don't really know. I don't think we're supposed to understand the indescribable breadth of that gift. That's the point. God chose to hold nothing back from us. He has given us every spiritual gift. If it's possible for us to receive it, than he will provide it to us.

Second, he has chosen us to be holy and blameless before him. Now, God knows that we are not holy and blameless people. And he knew back then that we wouldn't be holy and blameless people. So that means from before the foundations of the world, God had already decided that he would do whatever it took to make us holy and blameless.

Third, in his great love, he has chosen to adopt us as his sons. Before the beginning of the world, he decided it would be to the purpose of his will and the praise of his grace to send his only begotten son and make us his adopted sons. We are not God's children because he had to make us his children. We are not God's children because we earned a place as his children. We are God's children because, before we were even born, he looked at us in all our sinfulness and said, "Yes, that's my son. That's my daughter. And I will love them as my own child."

That is the love of our heavenly Father. But this is accomplished through His Son, Jesus Christ. Who also loves us. Who loves us with the same love as his Father. And so while the *berekah* for the Father may end here, the *berekah* for the Son begins here.

In him – in the Son – we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. The Son did not just say, "I love you," he demonstrated his love by shedding his blood. He did not just say, "I love you," he demonstrated his love by forgiving the very sinners who nailed him to a cross. He did not just say, "I love you," he demonstrated his love by redeeming the unredeemable.

He did this according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us. There is nothing more valuable in all the world than a gracious God. Because if you have a gracious God who lavishes that grace upon you, then you have nothing to worry about. Nothing to fear. You will lack nothing. For His grace will always be sufficient for you.

This was the wisdom and insight of the Gospel. Which is, indeed, a mystery of God's will. For God's grace doesn't make sense to human beings. It doesn't make sense to give your life to redeem a worthless creature. It doesn't make sense to forgive your enemy. The Gospel doesn't make sense. It's foolishness. It's a mystery.

And yet, it was God's plan. And when the fullness of time had come, God set forth that plan. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. God the Son carrying out God the Father's plan by being born in Bethlehem. A plan that the Father has had since before the foundations of the world. A plan to take us, fallen creatures, divided from him by sin. And unite us back to him through his love for us.

And so, in Christ, we have obtained an inheritance. God the Father has adopted us as his sons and now we are included in the family of God, with all the rights and inheritance of a son. The inheritance of his kingdom. The inheritance of eternal life. The inheritance of a new heaven and a new earth. Just as the only begotten Son received the inheritance of resurrection on Easter morning, so we too will receive the inheritance of resurrection on the last day. That is our hope in Christ. And the best way that we can praise God's glory is to cling to that hope.

But we are not alone until we see the fulfillment of that hope. The Son does not leave us abandoned until he comes again. And so this *berekah* makes another transition. Blessing the Holy Spirit for his part in our salvation. Showing his great love for us as well.

For from the moment we heard the word of truth, the moment we heard the Gospel of our salvation, the moment we believed in Jesus Christ, we received the Holy Spirit. Maybe that was as an adult. A memory we can point to distinctly and say, "Yes, that's the moment that I knew God loved me." Or maybe it was as a child, as an infant, unaware of what was going on around us, and yet still hearing that word of grace, "I baptized you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

Whenever it was, at that moment we were sealed by the Holy Spirit. That word – sealed – probably meant a lot more to St Paul's readers. For us, when we think of seals, we think of packaging. The seal on a bag of chips or a bottle of Tylenol.

But in the ancient world, a seal was proof of ownership. You sealed a letter to say, “This is authentic. It was written by me and my seal is proof of that.” When Pilate sealed Jesus' tomb, it was to say, “This tomb belongs to Pontius Pilate. If you mess with it, you are messing with Caesar's representative, the Roman governor himself.”

In Holy Baptism, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. In love, he declares to all of heaven and earth, “This person belongs to me now. I will make sure he receives his promised inheritance. And there is nothing you can do to stop that from happening. I have guaranteed it. It will happen.”

This also is to the praise of his glory. For the God who did not abandon Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, the God who did not abandon Moses or the Israelites, the God who did not abandon his people in Babylonian exile, will not abandon us. He has chosen us, adopted us, redeemed us, and sealed us as his own.

The Father loves you. The Son loves you. The Holy Spirit loves you. God loves you. And he wants you to know just how loved you are. Amen.