

“It’s All about Me”
Christmas 2c
Ephesians 1:3-14

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January 3, 2010

In Jesus’ Name.

Leonard Sweet teaches at Drew University’s school of theology. He has quite an imagination and a reputation for doing things, shall we say, differently. He tells the story of being invited to preach at the graduation service of one of the more staid and proper divinity schools in the nation. As I remember the story he told, he stood in the pulpit and took a large ball of yarn, held onto the end and lobbed it into the rows of graduating seniors. He named a blessing he had from God and asked the person who caught the ball to name a blessing from God and to throw the ball across to someone else. The risk he took, of course, was that the person to whom he threw the ball would not catch it, or catching it would refuse to play along with him. That is always the risk that comes with inviting someone to come out and play. But the young woman who caught the ball named a blessing, grabbed onto the yarn, and threw the ball on to someone else. Soon the ball of yarn was crisscrossing the rows of students and strayed even into the staid and proper faculty and the rows of family and friends gathered for the graduation.

I have used this idea at confirmation camp. The youth, counselors, and pastors stand in a circle, naming blessings while throwing the ball of yarn back and forth until we have created what looks like a giant spider web. We talk about God’s web of blessings that knit us together with one another and to God. It is in fact the first group activity we do as a part of our study of the book of Ephesians. After the salutation is out of the way in verses 1 and 2 Paul leads off his letter saying, “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.” He goes on to list extravagant

blessings. If we started listing them on newsprint the way we do at confirmation camp we would write down:

- God chose us
- destined us for adoption
- God's good pleasure is aimed at us
- God freely bestowed glorious grace on us
- we are redeemed through the blood of the Beloved and so have forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us
- God made known to us the mystery of his will
- we have obtained an inheritance
- we live for the praise of God's glory,
- we are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit.

It is difficult to separate out the blessings to make a list. These verses are one long run-on sentence overflowing with God's blessings to us.

Did you notice how often Paul uses the first person. God chose us. God destined us for adoption. It is all about us. It is all about me. "It is all about me" has become a stock saying people use as a critique. For example, Ralph launches into a narrative about what happened during lunch at the restaurant and how the waiter forgot about him and did this and that which was inappropriate and on and on. After hearing himself talk for a while Ralph realized he has not taken into consideration anyone else's feelings or perspective on the matter. He interrupts himself saying, "because it is all about me." After laughing at himself he starts again, this time with more charity towards others involved. It is much better when it happens this way than for someone else to have to say to us with a hint of sarcasm, "After all, it is all about you." The spirit of the times promotes a way of looking at life and operating in the world in which in everything, "It is all about me." You know that person at the back of the airplane. As soon as the plane is at the gate and before the seatbelt light goes off, just as you are standing to retrieve your bag from the overhead, she charges ahead of others, almost knocks you down, because it is all about her. You

know the guy who slips around the line of cars on Harlem waiting to get on the Eisenhower and wants to cut in front of me. He thinks it is all about him. He should know it is all about me.

For Paul it is all about me as we are joined to one another and to God in this web of blessing. If we are unhooked from the web we are also unhooked from God's blessings. We need someone to throw that ball of yarn out to us. God's blessings are for me as we are joined to one another. God lavished all these blessings on us. And God does so through Christ.

Those who come together for Passover sing an up-tempo song about God's blessings. The song is called Dayeinu, meaning "It is enough." They sing, "Had God brought us out of Egypt and not divided the sea for us, Dayeinu, it would have been enough. Had God divided the sea and not permitted us to cross on dry land, it would have been enough. Had God permitted us to cross the sea on dry land and not sustained us for forty years in the desert, it would have been enough. Had he sustained us for forty years in the desert and not led us into the land of Israel, it would have been enough. Had God led us into the land of Israel and not built for us the Temple, it would have been enough. Had God built for us the Temple and not sent us prophets of truth, it would have been enough." We would have to add a verse, a verse that breaks the pattern. Our verse is, "Had God sent us prophets of truth but not sent us Jesus it would not have been enough. Had God sent us Jesus and not done any of those other things it would have been enough."

God lavishes all blessings on us through Christ. God does so through his blood. What is bound up in that ball of yarn is Christ's suffering. What perspective does this lend to it being all about me? Christ died for me.

In William Faulkner's play "Requiem for a Nun," a woman mourns over all the sorrow that has come her way in life. An infant died. Accusations are directed at her for the child's death. She is in a conversation with someone who has been telling her the usual things we hear

about sorrow and how God works through it. She says, “Why does it have to be suffering. Can’t God find some other way to us?” The question can be extended to Jesus’ suffering. Could God have saved the world some other way than by sending Jesus to die? I have often heard it said, when explaining why God sent the Son to die on a cross, that God tried everything else first. He sent a flood to wipe wickedness from the earth. God saved Noah and his family because Noah was righteous. After the flood, however, Noah does not act righteously. Sin regenerated along with the plants, the animals, and the multiplying humans. God chose one people from among all others so that God could bless all others through them. God’s chosen people rebelled and worshiped other gods. God sent the prophets to warn them. God unleashed enemy armies to punish them. God sent them into exile and brought them home again. God sent prophets to woo them as a husband his wife. As we say in Morning and Evening Prayer, quoting from chapter one and verse one of the book of Hebrews, “In many and various ways God spoke to his people of old by the prophets. But now in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” God tried everything else. As a last resort God sent the son.

One of Jesus’ own parables misleads us in this direction. The master of the vineyard lent his vineyard out to tenants and moved to a far country. When it came time to collect his rent he sent his slaves. “But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them saying, ‘They will respect my son.’” They killed the son in an effort to seize the land for themselves. Jesus told the parable in hearing range of his opponents who were scandalized by the implication of Jesus’ story that he was the Son of God. They did not respect him, but did to him just what the tenants did to the son in Jesus parable. Making Jesus a last resort makes God sound like us, trying by trial and error to see what might work.

Paul contradicts this with something truly astonishing in the second reading today. Paul says, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." God intended our redemption in Christ before the first cornerstone was laid. When the whole creation and all of history were still on the drawing table, God chose us in Christ. While the engineering was still being worked out, God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. Before time began God already had determined what inheritance we would receive through Jesus Christ, nothing less than life in God's presence. In our time God gave us a down payment on our inheritance. That pledge is given in our baptism. We are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, which God breathes into our lives. God's blessings abound in Jesus' name, Amen.