7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.14.24

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.

Mark 6:14-16
King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (334)

The seal of Harvard College was designed in 1643, not long after the college's founding in 1636. In it, there are images of three books, all open. Two of them are open facing up. The third is open but facing down. Across all three is the word *Veritas,* Latin for "truth." "VE" across the first open book facing up, "RI" across the second open book facing up, and "TAS" across the third book, though this facing down.

In 1847, the seal underwent an official revision. It had been tinkered with throughout the centuries and would continue to be down to this day. But there was a major change in the mid-nineteenth century. That third book was turned to face up. Now, it was as if all the contents of all those books could be read and known. Now, the seal suggested, even insisted, there would be nothing not to be known, nothing indeed unknowable.

We were living in the Newtonian world then. Newtonian science was reaching its high point, was beginning its dominance not only in the world of scientific discovery but also in much of human culture. Though Newton himself was born around the same time as Harvard College, in 1642, his framework for studying the physical universe would take a century or two to rise to its dominance, to make its way across the Atlantic to the wilderness of the New World—and it would

allow for the idea that soon would come the day when people would know everything, come to understand *every thing* which would amount to us knowing everything.

Such was the reasoning for turning that third book to face up, would be my guess.

But we would do this by cheating, if you ask me. We would come to know the whole world and all that is therein by letting go one big nagging question: Why? Not just how, but why? And not "why" in terms of what causes any given thing, but "why" in terms of to what purpose, "why" in terms of to what end?

The Newtonian has nothing to say about that question, and so, among some of its more rigid ideologues, this is a question that shall not even be asked. Because for something to have a purpose, it has to have had a mind, a creative mind, on that purpose and behind the creature made for that purpose. Indeed, to speak of something's purpose is to speak also something of God.

Which for some is a no-go.

I actually read that in an interview once between a science writer and a scientist—that this is an absurd, illegitimate question. The writer asked a question as to the why of something, and the scientist said essentially that you can't ask that question, that it is indeed an absurd question. He meant not that you *shouldn't* ask it, but that you *can't*, that indeed the interviewer had gone out of bounds. Forget that the interview had asked the question, thus proving that you *can* actually ask it. No.

This interview, as I remember it, was printed in the magazine *Free Inquiry,* a self-described secular humanist publication.

My thought when I read it was this: "So much for free inquiry. We have reached the limit past which we cannot inquire.

"We got *there* quick."

Lesslie Newbigin is a Bishop of the Church of England and a writer I enjoy reading when I'm up for a challenge. He explains in his book *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* how the question of purpose has played out in Western thought.

"Greek physics," he writes, "had worked with the idea that change and movement in the world of nature are to be explained in terms of purpose, [some ultimate end to which a thing or phenomenon can be understood to serve, and absent which end the thing or phenomenon cannot fully be understood. Like, have you ever come across a tool in a tool box whose purpose you can't envision? You don't know what it is until you know what's for.

"Likewise,] Medieval thought saw divine purpose manifest everywhere in the world of nature [things created for the purpose, and perhaps, or at least apparently, the sole purpose, of glorifying God, delighting God, loving and being loved in God."

But with the emergence of Newtonian physics, he explains, "the work of science was one governed not by purpose but by natural laws of cause and effect. Teleology[, that is thinking about the end or the purpose or the *telos* of a phenomenon,] had no place in physics or astronomy. All the movements of tangible bodies and the chances in the visible world could be explained without reference to purpose, in terms only of efficient cause," efficient cause, the thing just prior that made this given thing do that or be this way.

In sum, in the Newtonian world, "To have discovered the cause of something is to have explained it." As such, there was "no need to invoke purpose or design as an explanation." No, on the contrary, there is a need *not* to because, when it comes to the full grandeur of the cosmos and all that is therein, every part and particle, every circumstance and opportunity, the purpose of a thing cannot actually fully be known until all is revealed at the end. And this is to bow to mystery; this is to recognize an aspect of existence and all that is therein that we *cannot* know, which is an offense to such Enlightenment conviction, and therefore is a thing that shall not be wondered about.

Here's Newbigin again: "The thinkers of the Enlightenment spoke of their age as the age of reason, and by reason they meant essentially those of analytical and mathematical powers by which human beings could attain to a complete understanding of, and thus a full mastery of, nature—or reality in all its forms."

Consider: when asked what the Enlightenment was, Immanuel Kant "used the famous phrase, 'dare to know…'" in which is the underlying value judgment that what it takes to know is courage, and therefore any unknowing is due to a failure of nerve, rather than the possibility of enduring mystery toward which wisdom would have us in a reverential nod, if not a deep bow—true and full knowledge being accessible to us only once all is finished and brought at last to fullness of its original purpose at the ultimate end, what Paul called in his Letter to the Ephesians "all things being gathered up in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

I was talking with one of you once. You'd gone to a workshop, long and intensive. This was a long time ago and it was to learn a new program you wanted to bring to your church. It would bear good fruit. It would cause the church to grow in mission and maybe also in membership. You'd gone with a couple others, and it was a wonderful week together. You made a new friend

and made stronger bonds with a long-time acquaintance. Then you brought the program back to your church and tried to implement it, tried to make it bear its fruits. But it didn't take. No one really took to it. It foundered on the bookshelf in the church library. It was a waste of time and resources, you said, because the program never found its fit. Then, a few years later, one of the people at the workshop died of cancer. You were companion through that. It all came to a sad end. Yes, what a waste.

"But what if that was its purpose?" I asked you in a conversation years after the fact, when you were telling me about it all. "What if the true purpose of going to that workshop wasn't the program you'd learn and then implement (or not: bummer!) but the companion you became for someone who didn't even know she'd need such a thing several years hence?"

See, you were living in the Newtonian world, the world of cause and effect, where if the effect wasn't the one anticipated, then the whole effort was a failure or the driving idea was false. But the Newtonian world isn't where we *need* to live anymore. Current physics has come to see the warp and weft of things as far more surprising, recognizing that things seem to move not only from an efficient cause but also toward some attractive, perhaps final goal. And until we can see that final goal, we can't truly know what's going on, the why of it.

But that isn't to say there's nothing *to* know.

Just because we can't know the whole truth, doesn't mean there isn't truth to know.

Turns out, classic Christian thought has long been in this place between original cause and final purpose, and from its earliest days. Paul, the earliest writer of Christian thought that we know of, seems to have been convinced of this. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote quite a lot of purpose—and wise that he did because he was striding two great rivers of culture and thought which, due in large part to his efforts, which were due to his conviction, were converging. Jews and Gentiles: these two once mutually-exclusive streams of human being, were converging, and at his efforts, and it required an utter reconsideration of the purpose of it all.

Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee, which means he likely had a clear sense of his purpose in the world. He was to be righteous before the Law, by which the Lord, who first gave the Law, could be known.

But then there was this new revelation, Jesus of Nazareth crucified and raised and thus revealed as the Messiah, which had him operating as such not only for the Jews (and, turns out, not principally for the Jews) but for all the world, which meant that now Jews and Gentiles weren't

so distinct from one another, if though in practice, not in value or in purpose. All are created by God in order to be loved by God and, in such love, to love one another.

Paul, in writing to the churches in Ephesus, was writing mostly to Gentiles, which turn of event likely surprised no one as much as it would have surprised Paul himself. He'd have had no reason to interact with Gentiles until this utterly reorganizing event. Indeed, he'd have had every reason *not* to interact with Gentiles until Jesus, now resurrected, revealed himself to Paul, knocking him off his feet and striking him blind for a time.

The Letter to the churches in Ephesus would speak of God's purpose in this utterly surprising, even scandalizing, convergence of what had once been blessedly separate. "He destined us for adoption," Paul writes, including himself in this new version of "us," and speaking of God's ends toward which this new mighty stream of human being now was to flow. "With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will…as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth," which purpose and plan weren't known until now but have been attractive since the beginning. "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 purpose of praising his glory."

If you're frequently in these pews, you might have noticed I often speak of purpose from this pulpit. I often evoke the word and concept, especially in the pastoral prayer: "We are made in your image and created for your purpose." This, by the way, is to speak of the beginning and of the end, the origin and the goal, what scripture witnesses in the being and way of Christ, who therein is named the alpha and the omega—created in the beginning in your image and set to you purpose which we shall fully know at the end. And I sometimes think there's nothing more of resistance to current thought that I do when I stand here in this pulpit than to speak of our purpose, to invoke God as purpose.

So many people alive today can only hardly conjure up some sense of purpose. Meanwhile, life is hard, and the struggle is real, and the humiliations come fast and loose. Turns out, the Newtonian world can really trounce us; and, it insists, this trouncing is for no good reason.

So having a sense of purpose is more important now than ever. But it can't be one conjured out of thin air. Any purpose you might make up for yourself might sustain you for a day, for a time, but eventually you'll need something more of truth to enter in—something of how utterly loved you are by your creator and which your fellow creatures are here to live into with you,

for you, and because of you—and you for them. We don't know to what purpose you will be put on any given day, but we can trust that it is always God's purpose at the end, good and gracious and gathering of your glory.

So, if you don't the plan, don't worry about it. Trust the purpose, which is ultimately beyond you fully to know.

When I was at Harvard, four years for divinity school (I took my time. What's the rush?), I'd seek out which seal dominated any space. To be sure, the Harvard seal is *everywhere* on campus. It's like you're really meant never to forget you're at Harvard. But there's a mix of them to be found, all the books up, one of the books down, so I'd often take note, which is the one to cast its tone on this place, on that place?

I always liked when it was the older version, the *humbler* version.

Funny thing, one place where the older version is not at all to be found (at least as far as I could tell) is the Memorial Church in the Central Yard. Here the newer seal insists itself, chiseled into the stone over the front door, soldered into the bronze grill work of the roodscreen, carved into the woodwork of the pews, set into the floor of the church's Memorial Room. Amusing, when not irritating: if there were anywhere on such a campus that the capacity for human knowing and discovery should be held both in awe but also in humility, it's Harvard's church.

But if it's too late for that architecture, it's high time for our practice. We were destined for the good purpose of a loving creator who accomplishes all things. We are free to inquire after such gracious truth. The fact that we shall never fully know in the living of our days is humbling, perhaps. But isn't a lovely image for a summer Sunday afternoon, putting your book down and closing your eyes and taking a moment's rest?

Thanks be to God.