

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Children of God: Caution - God at Work
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 50:15-26
Ephesians 1:15-23

When I was in sixth grade my family moved me to a new neighborhood. I managed to make two new friends and we would regularly hang out at each other's houses. One day when I went to visit Keith he was building model cars...funny cars I think. He asked me if I wanted to help. Sure I said, having no idea what I was doing. So he gave me all of the parts for the engine; the block, the headers, the manifold covers...all of the usual. To be honest I had never seen an engine before; even so I decided I could figure it out. But when I put the headers (the exhaust manifolds) on top of the block like a roosters crown, Keith knew that I was in trouble; that I had no idea how all of this went together. I have to say I still feel that way when I watch those of you in the auto industry actually manage to create cars that work and work well. With dozens of suppliers spread out across multiple continents trying to build exact parts designed by someone someplace else, not to mention research, marketing and finance, I am overwhelmed by how complicated this process is. Yet even with its complexity, it pales in comparison to the task that is set before the children of God.

And what is this task that is set before us? It is to help make earth more like heaven. This is part of the Lord's Prayer which we offer up every Sunday, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are to be those who make this world one in which every human being is treated as if they are a beloved child of God. We are to be those who make sure that everyone has enough; enough food to eat, enough education, enough love. We are to be those who make sure that everyone has adequate housing. We are to be those who make sure that people have clothes on their backs...both winter and summer. We are to be sure that there is justice in which all persons are treated equally before the law regardless of race, creed, status or sexual orientation. We are supposed to be God's coworkers in this kingdom-building endeavor. But if we are honest with ourselves, it appears to be an overwhelming task. In the face of generational poverty, recession, layoffs, a struggle for medical care, disease and terrorism, we find it easier to simply enjoy what we have, which is a good thing, and ignore the problems that are not ours, a not so good thing.

As those called to be God's co-workers, helpers if you will, we need encouragement to continue our task. And in these opening words of Ephesians we find that encouragement. We find words to the church to keep us going. First we are told that we are to be a people of hope. Paul prays that the church might know what is the "hope to which we have been called." You and I live in what is becoming more and more a "chicken little" world. What I mean by this is that every time something goes wrong, we are supposed to be afraid and run around in a panic saying, "All is lost!" It doesn't matter whether it is Ebola or the fact that there is no real five second rule for food that has fallen to the floor and we could die if we ate it...which is actually one of my favorites because I am here to attest that I have lived

through it...we are to give up all hope. Yet Paul tells us that we need to become people of hope. We are to be people of hope not simply because the world needs it, but because we believe that the ultimate fate of creation is in God's hands and not ours or someone else's. And because of this we can look at the messiest future with hope and we can share that hope with others.

Secondly Paul prays that we are to learn about the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints. Note, Paul is not talking about our inheritance, but God's. This may seem a strange thing for Paul to say until we realize that in scripture, children are the inheritance of their parents. This was made clear when I was home one Christmas and went out for an early morning walk with my father and one of my brothers. We met a Jewish friend of my fathers who commented on what a great inheritance my father had with four sons. It is a great inheritance because of how we could care for our father. The riches then that children bring are what they can do for their parents. So what Paul is saying here is that we need to learn of the riches we can bring to God because we are God's children; because we are God's inheritance. We are to learn what we can bring to God as part of God's world changing program.

Finally we are to learn that we do not do this on our own but that we do this with the power of God. Paul writes that we are to learn "what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those of us who believe, according to the work of God's great power." What this means is that ultimately it is the power of God working through us that changes the world. There is an assumption out there that the world will slowly on its own become a more caring and enlightened place; that people will naturally evolve into the kind of people that make the world better. I would argue that this is not so. All we have to do is look to ISIS and the world's continuing love affair with violence and hatred to see that this natural evolution is not so natural. The gift of God though is that God's power is available to us, that it might be used to make the world the better place God desires it to be.

I want to ask a question as we close. How many of you have looked out at the world and felt discouraged? I thought so...most of you. And it is that discouragement that makes us wonder if what we do in the world makes any difference. The answer is that what we do makes a difference. When a child at this church learns that they are loved by God, the world becomes a bit more like heaven. When a youth comes to this church and discovers a place of safety in which they can truly be themselves, the world becomes a little more like heaven. When we come to worship and learn more fully how to live the Christ-like life, the world becomes a bit more like heaven. When we help to teach a child at Alcott how to read, the world becomes more like heaven. When we help foster children and families know that they are not alone, the world becomes more like heaven. When we fill up bags with food for Shop and Drop, or at Thanksgiving for hungry families, the world becomes more like heaven.

You and I are called to the task of making earth a bit more like heaven. None of us, individually or collectively, even with God's help will be able to do this in our lifetimes. This realization, however does not give us the right to ignore our task. Instead we are called to do what we can, when we can to transform the world around us. My challenge then to all of you for this week is this, to ask, "How am I making earth a little bit more like heaven every day?"