It's the Music!

EPHESIANS 1:3-14 (NRSVUE) *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, [4]just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. [5]He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, [6]to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. [7]In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace [8]that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight [9]he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, [10]as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. [11]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, [12]so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. [13]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; [14]this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*
The Word of God for the people of God!

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity listgs over 45,000 denominations worldwide. *FORTY-FIVE THOUSAND!!!* Each believing its doctrine is right! No wonder a "spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public" is turned off!

It wasn't always that way. Oh, I guess there always have been heresies: Gnosticism, Docetism, Arianism, Scientology… Alexander Campbell was called a heretic. We're called heretics by some Baptist groups today.

And, yes, it's important what we believe, not because it will send ud to heaven or hell. It's not our beliefs that do that, but our faith—there's a difference.

Beliefs are important because our ethical behavior and relationships emerge from our beliefs. For example, show me your checkbook or your credit card statement and I'll tell you what's important in your life. Jesus said, *"The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil, for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks"* (LUKE 6:45).

So, yes, beliefs matter because they are the basis of all we think, say, and do—and it is what we think, say, and do, and not the content of our beliefs, that are the essence of our faith.

All that changed early in the 4th century when the Roman Emperor, Constantine accepted Christianity as his primary religion; although, he continued to participate in the worship of the other gods in the Greco-Roman pantheon.

Soon after his conversion—if you can call it that—he convened the first Church Council at Nicaea, and the mainstream of Christianity was changed.

Until then, evidence of the presence of Christ in the Christian community was the relationships of the believers with each other. Jesus had said, *"By this everyone*

will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" **(JOHN 13:35)**

After the Council of Nicaea, the emphasis shifted from the community and the evidence of Christ's presence in the individual was correct belief—right doctrine. Lines were drawn: say the Creed, and you're in. Without the Creed… Sorry about that! The splintering of the Body of Christ was set in motion, and today over 45,000 sets of beliefs divide the Church and distinguish us from each other.

So we gather each Sunday and try to keep things clear, but it isn't easy because—if we're really honest—we're always in danger of confusing our ways with the Narrow Way of which Jesus spoke (Matthew 7:13-14). And so, we open the scriptures, and we ask the preacher, "Is there any word from the Lord?" because we've spent all week listening to the cacophony of other words that are not God's words.

The overwhelming number of differing (and sometimes belligerent) expressions of Christianity bicker over what is the right "belief." The trick is to match what we say we believe with what we do, and compare what we do with what Jesus did, according to the gospels, and in that way trust that our beliefs are "right." A tree is known by its fruit.,

What we say we "believe" means nothing if it is not reflected in Christlike behavior and relationships. Otherwise, it's hypocrisy.

Scottish theologian, William Barclay, called Ephesians "Paul's supreme letter." Scholars debate whether Paul actually wrote the letter, but his fingerprints are all over it. It clearly represents Paul's vision for the church and the world. The supreme task of the Church was (and remains) to continue the work of the incarnation. Like our Lord, the church is to open its arms and heart to embrace all people. The great dream was for reconciliation with God, with ourselves, and with each other.

As we look at today's reading from Ephesians and consider Paul's vision for the church and the world, maybe this Sunday there will be a word from the Lord.

The key thought is that in gathering around Christ and drawing our strength from him we find a center that will break through the powers and principalities—the creeds and divisive doctrines—and will unite all things. The presence of Christ moves us away from disunity and fragmentation; and by extension, the presence of disunity and fragmentation is evidence of the absence of Christ.

In these opening words of Ephesians the writer sets down the intention of all that will follow. He writes to deepen our adoration of God, to give us assurance that we are in God's hands, and that our great calling is the work we first saw in Christ: to reconcile all that is broken in the church and in the world.

And that's really pretty simple, you know: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself." "Blessed are the peacemakers." "Turn the other cheek." "The Good Samaritan." "Let the one without

sin cast the first stone." "I was hungry and your fed me…" All that stuff…

I enjoy Robert Fulghum's wonderful book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. On page 154 he shares an experience that moved him greatly.

Every year he spends a week in Weiser, Idaho, a tiny little place that's hard to find on a map: population 4,000—except the last week in June, when it becomes the home of the Grand National Old-Time Fiddlers' Contest.

During that week people from all over the world descend on that tiny village. Fiddlers come from Pottsboro, Texas; Sapulpa, Oklahoma; Caldwell, Kansas; Mountain View, Arkansas; and as far away as Japan. They come to play, and sing, and have a good time. Fulghum plays banjo, so he goes to join in the music.

Back when he first went there, fiddlers were pretty straight country folk. The men had very short hair, their wives stayed home and cooked, and everybody went to church on Sunday. But through the years the Fiddlers' Convention changed. Long-haired hippies began showing up. People with tattoos and leather jackets came on motorcycles. Some of these strange-looking people were wonderful fiddlers.

He asked one of the local old-timers what he thought about the new crowd. The old man said, "I don't care who they are or how they look. They can have a bone in their nose as far as I'm concerned. It don't matter. If you can fiddle, you're all right with me. It's the music that counts."

So, out there under the stars… a thousand people pickin' and grinnin,' singing and fiddling… fat and skinny, young and old, hippies and straights, people of just about every color. He said it was such a moving sight he came back year after year.

One year he was playing next to a local man. As they picked, the old man winked and said, "You know, sometimes the world seems like a mighty fine place."[1]

Some musicians read music; some like Susan and Miguel can sight-read—pick up a piece of music and read it as if they'd been playing it for weeks. Others don't read music, but if they hear it once, they can play it. My mom was like that. I can close my eyes and hear her playing "Mockingbird Hill." Sounded like honkey tonk pi-ano, but, hey… Some can improvise—you know, pick up a melody and play with it—turn it upside down and inside out. And it just seems easy and natural to them.

I'm a musician; but I can't do any of that. I read music, and I can play, but I haven't put in the six-hour practice days. But it don't matter. It's the music that counts.

Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Disciples, Pentecostals, non-denominational… And we all "believe" a bit different. But it don't matter. If it looks like Jesus when we act out our beliefs, that's all that counts.

[1] Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Ivey Books, 1986), p. 154.

Invitation to the Table

In our gospel reading for today, people are having a lot of trouble figuring out who Jesus is. Some thought he was Elijah, the prophet come back. Herod thought he was his cousin John, the baptizer, raised from the dead to plague him again.

We have the advantage of having the Gospels and the Epistles and the thoughts of Christians over the past 2000 years, but I think the clearest single thing that speaks to who Jesus is, is right here at the Table.

At the Table we remember the one who was, as Paul says, "The visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15)

At the Table we remember that he died on a cross—visible and tangible evidence that God shares life with humanity—there is no distinction between human life and divine life—and Jesus demonstrates the reality (the Way, the Truth, and the Life) that God has placed within humanity the capacity to live as God created us to live—to live out the image of God in which, not only Jesus, but all humanity is created and called "very good," to the end that "all peoples of the earth will be blessed."

Pastoral Prayer

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to you, that the whole world may become one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Life-giving God, heal our brokenness—and your individual children and as the human race you created and called, “very good.” Heal our near-sighted spirituality that we may acknowledge your wonderful deeds and live in gratitude from generation to generation through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We offer our praise and gratitude for your ongoing guidance, O God, for you sent us Jesus, our Teacher and Christ, to model for us the way to love each other and to love all of your beautiful creation. We offer prayers of love on behalf of ourselves and our neighbors, on behalf of your creation and all our fellow creatures.

God of healing mercies, you who hear the cries of your children in need. Receive our prayers for all who are troubled, that they may know peace, comfort, and courage, in the name and in the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.