

Ephesians 1: 11-22 All Saints Day 10.30.25 Bill Uetracht

One of my heroes in the faith, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, recently died. One of the many things that I truly appreciated about him was his use of language. Listen to these words of Brueggemann: “We now know that human transformation does not happen through didacticism or through excessive certitude, but through the playful entertainment of another scripting of reality that may subvert the old given text and its interpretation and lead to the embrace of an alternative text and its redescription of reality.”

“Wow!” you say. That is some amazing language. It takes me to an elevated place. But I have no idea what you are talking about.

I happen to be a fan of soaring language, soaring rhetoric. And for me, there is a role for such rhetoric, even if it is not easily understood. The book of Ephesians, from which we get our second lesson for today, is known for its soaring rhetoric. And yes, it is a book that can be hard to understand. Today we receive that rhetoric amidst one sentence that lasts for 21 verses. Ms. Schmalz, my English teacher in high school, would have given me an “F,” if I had written this letter, for she would have viewed it as a collection of run-on sentences. She hated run-on sentences. The author of Ephesians loved them because these sentences contributed to the soaring character of the rhetoric.

Actually, Ephesians may be an example of what some people (the nerdy among us) call “epideictic literature,” literature that sometimes is simply all about the language. The loftier the language, the more successful it is.

Now truthfully, I don't think that Ephesians' lofty language is only about the language. Ephesians isn't a language game, a matter of showing off. Ephesians' use of lofty language is for the sake of a lofty purpose. Sometimes when something is big and important, you use language that is big and important. For Ephesians, Jesus is big and important, so important that he is called "the Christ," which is to say that Jesus is the key to understanding all things. In him, Ephesians says, God has made known the great mystery of the ages, God's plan to gather up all things in him. God's plan, you see, is to bring everything and everyone together, through Christ, whom God has raised from the dead and seated at his right hand. For Ephesians, Christ is above all rulers, above all authorities. All things have been put under his feet. We're talking big stuff here. Big and lofty language is needed to express such a massive vision.

And in today's reading from Ephesians, we discover that we as the people of God are included in this massive vision, this amazing imagination. We have a big role to play. And the we involved is not just Jewish Christians, but also non-Jews, Gentiles, the audience that is receiving the Ephesians letter. We knew that the Jews had a special place. But now we are included.

In many ways, the climax of our text comes in these words, "In him, *you* also." You who are not Jewish, you, who are new to the story, are also included. You are a part of God's big vision for life and history. You are a part of the imagination of God.

You are a part of the big thing that God is doing. You are not a part of the periphery. You are a part of the inside. You are included in the inheritance. You are the recipient of the message of salvation. It's not just others who are sealed by God's gift of the Holy Spirit; you

are sealed with the Spirit. You have a special place and status in the dream of God. Hear that. Know that. Trust that.

The church, the whole church is a very important part of what God is up to. The author of Ephesians calls us “the body of Christ, “the fullness of him who fills all in all.” Wow! We are a part of the fullness of God. Come to grips with that, new members. This church life isn’t small potatoes. You are participating in something that is big. The church is an integral part of the dream of God for the world.

I personally think that this is an important message for those of us who live in the current era. In many places, the church has lost its clout and is suffering from low self-esteem. More and more of our congregations are closing. Many people see us as increasingly irrelevant. Even to many Christians, we are an afterthought. We are all so busy that what the church is up to just isn’t that important. Ephesians won’t let us reach this conclusion. We matter. We aren’t an afterthought to God. We are an integral part of God’s movement in the world. We are one of the most important means by which love flows to the world. Love gathered in Christian community is an essential part of the work of God in the world.

Now, I know that the church misused that insight in the past. Honestly, sometimes the church has taken itself too seriously. We thought we were the boss and in control. We brought out our flags and raised them high, thinking we were going to convert the world. We conducted crusades. We even killed in the name of Jesus. We were in charge, and we were going to force everybody to believe in Jesus. By the way, some of this spirit is showing up in the Christian nationalism that we are experiencing today in our own country. Nation and faith, country and church are being linked for the sake of

power, something that the early church, as a minority, powerless movement, would have never understood. Bringing the nation and the faith together for the sake of power and control is not in keeping with what God is up to in the world through the church.

That is quite clear in the message that Jesus proclaims in his sermon on the plain in the Gospel of Luke today. The big stuff that God is up to through the church is fundamentally not about power and control. Listen to Jesus words: “Blessed are you who are poor. Woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry now. Woe to you who are full now. Blessed are you who weep now. Woe to you who are laughing now.”

This is no vision of control or power. This is an imagination that sees the kingdom of God as our world turned on its head. Frankly, Jesus doesn't use lofty language here to make his point. He is quite straight forward and down to earth. In his world, the blessed are not the folks we think are blessed. The blessed are not the successful, the rich, the ones who run the show. The blessed are the ones who are often neglected, who frequently are begging, who are seeking food, who are weeping over their losses and their oppression. The blessed are not those who have fully overcome the challenges and losses of life, but those who find themselves in the midst of them. You who are grieving. You who are poor. You have a special place in the heart of God. Wow! This is a different world than the one we live in.

And this is the world that the church, the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills all in all, is called to live within. Our big work is a matter of living within the world that is turned upside down by Jesus.

This work may actually force us to move beyond our lofty language and thought and cause us to get a little messy with real life and real people. Maybe when all is said and done, the big task for us isn't loftiness, but realness. The big task is not a matter of staying away from the pain of the world, but entering into it, by tending to the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and our enemies, whom Jesus says need to be loved and prayed for.

God's big plan is a matter of bringing all things and all people together. Nobody is left out. Not the poor. Not the grieving. Not the folks who reject us or we reject. The big picture is God gathering all. The little picture is a matter of our trusting that, our living in a way that welcomes and embraces the fragile and the hated. That is the big task for the community that is Christ's body, the "fullness of him who fills all in all."