

Introduction to “Identity Theft” Series
Ephesians 1: 1-2; 6: 21-23
Don Lincoln

“Give me a ticket for an aeroplane – ain’t got time to take a fast train – lonely days are gone, I’m a goin’ home, my baby, just wrote me a letter.”

That was the first song I ever learned on guitar, done by the Box Tops in 1967. It was a popular song at the time, and even better – it had only a few, very easy chords to play!

That’s the song that came to mind this week as I pondered what I think is becoming a lost art. Letter writing. Think of the collections of letters written over the years by great figures in politics, theology, science, the arts – they are beyond measure and incredibly powerful, great literary gifts. I remember reading Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison when I was in seminary. I was astounded by the writings of this man imprisoned by the Nazis. There are letters from Van Gogh; Michelangelo writing about what was going on in their world at the time. We have letters from every US President. If you read the PCUSA General Assembly insert in your order of service this morning, you’ll see we’ve begun the process of considering how Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail might continue to edify the church for years to come.

Letters.

In the late 1940’s my father drove one of his younger sisters from Buffalo, NY to Westminster College in New Wilmington, PA. She was going there to attend the Presbyterian church mission conference. The conference is over a century old now. Because of the long drive my father stayed overnight in a dorm there at the college before going home the next day. That evening he was fixed up on a blind date by friends of his who were also attending the conference. Fixed up on a date with a local girl from New Wilmington. He did drive back to Buffalo the next day, but of all things he left his shaving kit in the dorm room. So it was the responsibility of his blind date to get it, pack it up, and mail it back to him. It came with a lovely letter thanking him for the enjoyable dinner date the evening before. Thus began the almost daily, two year letter writing courtship of the two folks who would eventually become my mom and dad. Long distance phone calls? No way. There was no such thing as unlimited minutes back then. You just didn’t do that unless it was an emergency. Letters did the trick.

Letter writing – a dying art. What would we have now? The collected emails of the Rev. Don Lincoln? The Presidential Tweets, Volume Four? About the only letters I receive anymore are the remnant few of those proverbial Christmas letters, which are mostly about accomplishments of somebody’s children or grandchildren, what sports they are doing; what trophies they won; or recitations of all the places people have traveled recently; or a listing of all the medical procedures they’ve survived in the last 12 months.

Thanks be to God Paul wrote letters. Thanks be to God. The letter to the Ephesians is one of 13 New Testament letters attributed to the apostle Paul. 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Titus. Ephesians is one of the four so-called “Prison Letters” – written during one of Paul’s imprisonments in the early 60’s. That’s not 1960’s – that’s 60’s! Paul’s earliest letter is from around 52 A.D. – so Ephesians is written after nearly a decade, a decade of ministry and writing. It’s clear from scripture that Paul wrote additional letters, and it’s also clear we don’t have all of them.

Now I need to inform you there are some scholarly disputes about whether or not Paul actually wrote ALL of those letters, or whether some might have been penned by followers, and given Pauline attribution. That’s not an unheard of thing in the day and that’s a much longer more involved academic discussion than a sermon really has time for, but let me say a little bit about that. Because in the case of Ephesians, I tend to lean toward those who attribute it to Paul despite some questions.

One of the arguments for Ephesians NOT being Paul’s is that certain words and phrases show up in Ephesians that don’t show up in other Pauline letters—one’s we know were written by Paul. Another point is while we know Paul preached for several years in Ephesus, and had a warm affection for the church there, the letter to the Ephesians is strangely impersonal and lacks any local color. And unlike other letters where Paul says “Give my greetings to Priscilla, Joe, Sue, and Betty and Bob and all the rest....” there are no greetings to individuals in this letter. And, at another point the author makes statements that his audience has presumably heard of his ministry, which seems to indicate that maybe the author doesn’t even know his readers first-hand.

Frankly, if you looked at some of my sermons from 15 or 20 years ago, I’m sure there are phrases I use now that I wasn’t using back then. No. 1 - There was no such thing as a Tweet. Right? I learned the phrase “God’s best gifts come wrapped up in flesh” since I arrived at Westminster. Language changes; we learn new things. And if you take Colossians – which all scholars consider truly Paul’s – and put it up against next to Ephesians – there are way more linguistic similarities than differences.

Another point that I love – the oldest manuscripts we have of the letter to the Ephesians actually don’t have the words “in Ephesus” – “to the saints in Ephesus”- in the text. “In Ephesus” is missing. Which to me supports the theory that this is actually a circular letter – an encyclical – written to churches in a region, of which the church at Ephesus was one. It was passed around; church to church. Tychicus – mentioned in chapter 6, the guy who was carrying the letter – took it from church to church and then just filled in the blank – to the church at; to the saints in – in this case Ephesus’. This could account for why the letter lacks any personal address to individuals or citations at the end, “Give my greetings to so and so.” It could also explain why it doesn’t have local color, and why it doesn’t specify particular conflicts or issues in a local congregation like we find in 1st and 2nd Corinthians.

I frankly also find it difficult to imagine that two persons in the early church were so similar in native genius, exalted spiritual insight and writing ability as Paul and some unknown counterpart, and yet we would have absolutely no independent historical evidence for the existence of such another spiritual giant in that day. Just no record.

But enough of that. What about this letter of Ephesians?

Ephesians consists of only six chapters. In the pew Bible, it is four pages long. It contains only 155 verses. It might take 20 minutes to read aloud, and less time to read to yourself. So do it. My commendation to you is to read it. I hope you will read it a couple of times – so that as we enjoy this eight week preaching/teaching series on Ephesians, the power of this letter will begin to be woven – not into just you – but into the life of this congregation.

John Calvin, the so called “father of Presbyterianism,” – a reformer who lived a few hundred years ago - said Ephesians was his favorite – his FAVORITE of all the letters. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, English poet, literary critic, philosopher and theologian – who was buddies with William Wordsworth – pronounced Ephesians one of the divinest compositions ever written.

Commentator William Barclay calls Ephesians “the queen of the epistles.” Great missionary Ruth Paxson called Ephesians “the Grand Canyon of Scripture, breathtakingly beautiful and inexhaustible to the one who wants to take it in.” Another New Testament scholar wrote, “Pound for pound Ephesians may well be the most influential document ever written.”

Ephesians can be divided into two parts – the first three chapters, often defined as the doctrinal portion, and the second three chapters about ethical living. One scholar calls the first half the “wealth of the Christian,” which describes the doctrines of the faith and the second half the “walk of the Christian.” But Ephesians is not a dry Systematic Theology.

John Mackay, former president of Princeton Seminary who, at the age of 14, was brought to faith in Christ while reading Ephesians, wrote this: “Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is the greatest, maturest and for our time the most relevant of all Paul’s writings. But Ephesians is pure music; what we read here is truth that sings. The sequence of ideas is liturgical, prayerful worship, rather than cold logic.”

Some scholars say the liturgical nature of the language suggests an indebtedness, on the author’s part, to snatches of hymns, creed, prayer and sacramental idioms. Perhaps liturgical language that was already being utilized in the early church – and of course, the reality is that much of what Paul writes here probably BECAME liturgical pieces of the life of the church once they receive this letter. Remember – many of Paul’s letters were written to be read aloud in the church or churches to which they were sent. One could imagine Paul “expecting his hearers to be fired up by the same doxological outbursts that he rehearses, and to be thrilled, as he evidently was, with the good news of God’s amazing grace and reconciliation.”¹

An example of this – let me read one such section, which concludes with one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture. It comes in chapter three:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, He may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

What a glorious hymn!

Or try this simple phrase on for size: *“By grace you have been saved by faith.”* Ephesians, the second chapter!

So how might this letter speak to us today? Here’s one example.

Paul is writing this letter from prison, probably in Rome. As readers in the Ephesian region of Asia Minor would know, Paul had been arrested on the charge of having brought a Gentile into the temple. Racial, cultural division between Jew and Gentile was a major issue in the Ephesian church, and Paul was the best qualified writer of antiquity to address both sides intelligently.

It seems that Gentile Christians, who were streaming into the church, were adopting an easygoing moral code based on a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching. At this same time, they were boasting of their supposed independence of Israel and were becoming intolerant of their Jewish brothers and sisters and forgetful of the Jewish past of salvation history.²

That’s what Paul was addressing. Ethnic rivalry. Gosh, can you imagine that – peoples of different traditions; different races; different origins not getting along? And in the church, of all places! How absurd can that be??

Paul commends to the Ephesians the unity of all things in Christ, and the role of the church – through its own unity – in being a witness to God’s embrace of the whole world. Clearly, while it was a critical issue for the church then, it is central to the church today – maybe even more so.

Paul writes how, through Christ, the greatest division among people has been healed. This new people of God, united and reconciled to God and one another through Christ, is to be an example of the new society of men and women intended by God, and a microcosm of God’s ultimate design for a broken and sinful people. The church’s sole

reason for existence is as the historical witness in real time; a witness in the world to what God's renewing purpose can do in our midst, making us one body in Christ. That, sisters and brothers, that alone makes Ephesians well worth the read!

So I invite you to join us – in worship, in the class, in your own study – as we reclaim our identity in Christ – the fact that we belong to one another. By grace we are saved; by the power of the One at work within us who can do infinitely more than we dare to ask, imagine or dream. May it be so. AMEN.

1. Ralph Martin, Interpretation Commentary on Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.
2. *ibid.*