

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

Theme: “*Predestined by grace*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The teaching of the church regarding predestination is often misunderstood and yet this good news for Christians is a blessed gift of assurance God clearly gives us through his Word. Listen again to God’s Word which proclaims you as predestined for salvation and the reason why you can be sure this gift belongs to you.

“In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1:5-6, 13-14)

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Misunderstanding Predestination

Let’s begin this address with some wonderful news. You folk whom God has called and gathered here today through the Holy Spirit are guaranteed for salvation to eternal life. God brings you this gift through the blessings of Holy Baptism and as baptised children of God your eternal destiny has already been mapped out for you. If you follow the path that God has set before, you can only end up resting in his arms. This is God’s promise to you that he has sealed with you through his gift of the Holy Spirit which he has poured into you. We call this assurance, *predestination*.

The most common and biggest problem for us as Christians as we wrestle with the teaching concerning predestination is that we try and make God’s Word say more than it does. To often we hear these blessed, gracious words that declare that Christians are predestined for salvation and we may draw two conclusions, both of which are wrong. The first is: ‘If I am saved, it doesn’t matter what I do, I’m still going to heaven.’ The second is: ‘If God chooses and has already determined who is going to be saved, it must mean he has already determined who is going to be eternally damned.’ Our Lutheran church has always spoken against both of these errors.

The first error concerns Christian living. It sounds reasonable that if a person has been predestined for salvation, then it doesn’t matter what they do, they are going to be saved. This would mean they could live a life of freedom, without regard for other people, without regard for God’s law, without the fear of judgement. Why would they need to worry about such things – they are predestined for salvation.

As good as this sounds, its basis is not God’s grace but his law. It supposes that God’s law no longer applies to Christian people so they can do whatever they want. It is this thinking that so many people in the community today look at the witness of sinful Christians and the obvious conclusion they draw is that Christianity is hypocritical. It would seem that Christians are just as bad as the rest of the community. But remember Jesus’ words in the sermon on the mount, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Mt 5:17). This means God’s law still needs to be obeyed, but as Christians we no longer obey the law to make us right with God, but because we have already been made right with God.

The good news for Christians is that God’s law remains and that we have this clear message for God as to how he wants us to live so we live according to his will. We do the right thing because it is pleasing to God and it means we live in peace with one another. Just consider for a moment if everyone lived by obeying the Ten Commandments. And when we fail, we turn back to God and we ask him to forgive us once more.

Being predestined for salvation doesn’t mean God’s law no longer applied to you, but it does mean that Jesus has already fulfilled the law perfectly so you are free to live in a way that’s pleasing to God.

The second error says, ‘If God chooses and has already determined who is going to be saved, it must mean he has already determined who is going to be eternally damned.’ This is *not what God’s Word says*. Remember that St Paul is writing to faithful Christians in Ephesus. He is writing to encourage them and so it is right that he gives them this good news that provides assurance and certainty. Paul never writes that God must

therefore predestine some people to damnation. Such a teaching would make a mockery of God's Word that says, "he died for all, that those who lived might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15). Jesus died so all people might be saved. He didn't die on the cross so that only a select few would be saved.

This is where we try to use our human logic to make sense of the mind of God. We try to rationalise that if God has predestined some people to be saved, it makes sense that he must therefore predestine others to not be saved. What this doesn't take into consideration however is human sinfulness that is turning people away from God. Whilst our sinful nature won't allow us to make a decision towards God, it will allow us to turn away from him.

As faithful Christians, the danger for us would be if God has decided that no matter what happens some people are already damned, how would we react to others? Would we go around trying to look into the hearts of other people and saying, 'Well, too bad but you're going to hell so I'm not going to help you?' Instead of reaching out in love towards all people, we might just right off those who don't think like us, or who don't go to church like us, or who we don't think measure up to our standards. As one for whom the gospel was shared later in my life, I'm glad that my friend, Brian Yates, didn't judge me as being unworthy of sharing God's Word with.

God's predestination doesn't mean he already decided who is going to be damned but rather Jesus died for all people, that all people might believe in him and be saved.

Predestined by Grace

Predestined for eternal life is not something anyone can ever earn. It is not a right but it is a gift. It is a grace gift that is founded on Jesus' death for all people which is freely given to all people. This isn't a special gift that comes to some Christians but not others. This gift comes to all Christians in the ordinary means that God has always used to establish his church. God adopts us as his children through Holy Baptism. God supports and nurtures us through his meal of Holy Communion.

In the light of God's Sacraments we can see the gift of being predestined as being a teaching that encourages us. Predestination isn't the main gift, but it is simply a powerful message that removes any ambiguity about the benefits of believing in Jesus' saving work on the cross that is then delivered through his gifts of baptism and Holy Communion. Predestination is the gift of assurance that encourages us every time we turn back to God and ask him to forgive us for the times we don't live according to his will.

You will notice that Christians are not responsible for any of this good work. God hasn't predestined some people because they are particularly good or deserving of his grace. This message is given as a gift of encouragement and assurance that people who might doubt their salvation can cling to in times of trial and uncertainty.

Sealed by the grace of God

You know the question people sometimes ask Christians, "If you were to die today, would you be certain that you are going to heaven?" How would you answer? I know that as good Lutherans we often answer with appropriate modesty and piety, 'I hope so'. If this might be your answer, I pray that God's Word today fills you with the confidence to answer boldly, "Yes! God will accept me just as I am, not because of what I have done, but for Christ's sake." Friends, this is not arrogance, it is the truth which God has promised to you.

You have been predestined, not because of who you are, but because of who Jesus is. The blessings Jesus won for you on the cross are freely given through God's gifts of baptism, Holy Communion and his absolution. The guarantee of your predestination is given through the gift of the Holy Spirit through which you have been sealed. Boldly proclaim this good news through your daily living and the next time someone asks whether you know you are going to heaven. Don't guess, don't wonder – just believe God's promise to you.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.