

The Council of God; the Council of Men

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10 [b]

July 15, 2018

Ephesians 1:3-14

³ **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 **even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world,** that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed 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 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on Earth. ¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ 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.

In the Name of Jesus.

When burying a Christian, the Church's Liturgy gives the words. The brothers and sisters in Christ are gathered, and as the body is lowered into the ground, they hear these words of blessing:

May God the Father, who created this body;

May God the Son, who by his blood redeemed this body,

May God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be his temple,

Keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh.

The blessing gives the recognition that this body did not make itself. Not made with human hands, but the workmanship of God the Father, it is not to be despised.

The blessing gives also the recognition that this person, for whatever accomplishments and accolades claimed here on Earth, and whatever failures or humiliations added, is nevertheless one whose sin was

taken up into the Body of Christ Jesus. This one's worthiness is determined solely and only by the redemption accomplished by the holy blood.

And the words of blessing give also the recognition that this person, created by the Father, redeemed by the Son, was sanctified. This one was daily gathered by the Holy Spirit to the cleansing gifts of Jesus.

As the body goes into the ground, those hearing the blessing have no despair. Only hope as the dead brother or sister is commended to the eternal care of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Mark 6:29:

²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

We don't know, of course, exactly what they spoke over the body of John the Baptist as they laid it in the tomb—what form of words did they use to bless and to commend John to the eternal care of the Lord?

But we do know they were disciples of the Lord—Scripture tells us that.

So, we know that they knew the Father who created all persons. And they knew the Son—for that's Jesus whom they are following each day, and to whom John the Baptist had pointed them. And they knew the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies the sinner by calling the sinner to the word of justification, gathering the sinner to the gifts of the Gospel.

As they laid John's body into the tomb, they knew, then, of a conversation concerning John that the world could not know.

They knew of the conversation in Heaven. The conversation on Earth concerning John the Baptist wasn't good. That's the conversation of Herod and his illegitimate wife, Herodias, and her daughter. This

conversation was driven by the devil and fueled with lies, malice, and death. But the conversation in Heaven, the deliberation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was of life. The Father who by his Word created all life. The Son who by his blood redeemed all life. And the Holy Spirit, who by the Word sanctifies the sinner.

Those laying John's body into the tomb were given to know, then, of the deliberations of the heavenly council which the Apostle Paul reveals to the Church in his letter to the Church in Ephesus. This is the heavenly council where God the Father has chosen us in Christ from even before the foundation of the world. [Ephesians 1:4]

In this conversation of the heavenly courtroom, we are ruled holy and blameless by no worthiness of our own, but because God the Father makes a decree. He predestined us for adoption through his Son Jesus Christ, and this was not according to any decision we made or will make, but according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in his beloved Son. [Ephesians 1:6]

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have had this conversation since the foundation of the world. Throughout the generations, the angels and archangels have witnessed this conversation. It has been revealed to the prophets, and the prophets have been sent forth to reveal it to sinners whom God loved and in his grace predestined to life.

In our own generation, and in all the generations following the cross, it is now delivered to us in the preaching of *the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, so that we are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit*. [Ephesians 1:13]

This knowledge of the conversation in Heaven between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, this recognition that the Father sets the Son in place as our advocate, that the Son intercedes to the Father on our behalf, that the Father justifies us by his Word, and that the Holy Spirit then proceeds from the Father and the Son to bring the announcement of justification to us as a free gift—this is the comfort of what is called *the doctrine of predestination*.

In Christ Jesus, writes Paul, we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. [Ephesians 1:11]

So, our salvation, our sureness and certainty every day that we are God's children and he will never

depart us, rests on no decision we make, on nothing we design in our own mind, nor on any pious feeling or spiritual desire we gin up in ourselves, but rests completely and only on the Word of our Lord. The Word that he justifies the sinner by grace. The word that he, in his love and mercy, chose us even from the beginning. The word that he forgives our sin and cleanses our consciences, making us holy and blameless before him.

This word from the council in Heaven that you belong to the Lord because he predestined you and he has brought that predestination to you in Baptism, and that he keeps you in the certainty of that predestination by daily speaking to you his Gospel, this word is what belonged to the disciples as they lay John into the tomb. So, John, their brother, they knew, belongs to life.

Meanwhile, as we still live in our sinful flesh here on Earth, we hear the words of another council. Not the heavenly council, but the council of men. This is the council where King Herod spoke to Herodias, and Herodias spoke to her daughter, and Herod spoke to the prison guards, and death was the result. This is the council on Earth in every generation. The council where the deliberation is made up of the voices of our sinful world, our own sinful flesh, and is driven by the demons.

It is a deliberation of judgment and condemnation, a conversation of malice and fear and death.

It is common to every sinner, for we all have the Law written on our hearts, and we are always ready to have that conversation. It is the groupthink of the Law here on Earth.

As we are drawn into this conversation, our conscience hears the accusation, is drawn into the guilt, is put under the fear of death, and is kept unclean by the Law.

At the same time, our Lord reveals to us the other council. The council in Heaven, where the Son intercedes to the Father for your forgiveness. Where the Father hears the intercession and justifies you. Where the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son to bring to you the justification decreed at the heavenly council, bringing to you the most holy words, *Take and Eat, Take and drink, the Body and Blood of Christ Jesus to sanctify you in your body and life.*

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have had this conversation about you from even before they created you. Ephesians 1:7:

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 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed 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.

In the Name of Jesus.