

SERMON: Our Inheritance
TEXT: Ephesians 1:3-14

7-11-21

Knives Out is a movie that came out in 2019. It was fairly popular with young adults through older adults. Pretty tame in terms of language and violence. And very entertaining as a mystery, comedy, and drama. If you haven't seen it, I recommend it. And I will try not to spoil it as I tell you more.

The story is centered around a prolific author and publishing tycoon who dies late at night after celebrating his 85th birthday with his family. Earlier in the day, he was heard arguing with each one of them: a son, a daughter, a son-in-law, daughter-in-law, and grandson. All of them have benefited greatly from this patriarch's fortune, but they also feel that they have suffered under his controlling and tyrannical ways.

Their grief over his death is minimal, and is completely overshadowed by their nervous anticipation at the reading of his will. The lawyer opens a large envelope and pulls out just one sheet of paper - a recent addendum to the original document. It states very simply that 100% of his estate, including a sprawling mansion on multiple acres of land, is bequeathed to his nurse, confidante, and caretaker Marta - a young immigrant from somewhere in Central America.

As you would imagine, the family members are outraged, even though each one had just days earlier assured Marta - who was deeply grieved - that she was one of the family and could count on them to take care of her financially. Now they were claiming that the young woman manipulated the old man - perhaps even seduced him. They also tried to make the argument that he was obviously not of sound mind.

This is a story that is familiar to us in many ways. Too often we have seen or heard about families that have been torn apart over issues of their inheritance, regardless of the size of that inheritance. Sometimes it is over an item that has sentimental value to one, but financial value to another. For one family I knew it was a simple fishing boat.

After my mom died our whole family was at my sister's home following the funeral. All of my mom's belongings had been laid out on tables in the garage, and my siblings and I decided that we would be the first to go through and take what we wanted. Then the grandchildren would have a chance, then the great grandchildren. Well, apparently this plan didn't get communicated to everyone else before the great-grands (being typical teenagers and children) swooped in, grabbing whatever looked interesting. I was certain there was no sentimental value

for them in the things they chose, as their families all lived out of state and the kids had only met their great grandma a couple of times. So, yes, I was a little bit miffed, even though I didn't know for sure what they took or whether I would have wanted it.

Today's passage from Ephesians has often been used to support the idea of predestination or election, something that Presbyterians used to be known for. It's the idea that God has already chosen or decided who will be saved and who will not, regardless of whatever good or bad we do. Regardless of how faithful or disobedient we are. In terms of inheritance, predestination would mean that the divine "will" was written before we were born, and it has already established who's in and who's out. It is a troubling theological premise, to be sure.

But the original idea was always to emphasize that salvation is God's doing. Pure grace. Pure gift. We cannot win it or lose it no matter how saintly or despicable we are. No one can be written out - or written in - at the last minute.

For me, calling it *grace* rather than *election* makes it more palatable and understandable, though not any less troubling. To be saved *no matter how despicable we are*? Really?

One contemporary theologian explained that “election is a statement about the wonder of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Election is misunderstood if it becomes primarily a question about the scope of God’s grace (who is included and who is not, and how one can know to which camp one belongs). It is above all else an affirmation that the God Christians know in Jesus Christ is gracious beyond the wildest reaches of their imaginations.” Furthermore, “God’s grace is not a response on God’s part to what human beings have done, but that which precedes (pre-venes or *comes before*) faith and its source.” And to add grace upon grace, we are “adopted children [who] belong to God not by virtue of family or law, but sheerly by God’s goodwill.” (George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3)

Back to the scripture, I find it easy to get a bit lost and overwhelmed in the long sentences and repetitiveness of this passage. So, let me break it down into - hopefully - more manageable pieces.

First, let’s begin with all the gifts from God that are lifted up in these verses. We are: blessed, chosen, destined for adoption, bestowed with grace, and marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. We have been given redemption, forgiveness, and wisdom. Note specifically that the gift of being chosen in Christ came “before the foundation of the world.”

Now, let's pull out the pieces describing the motive behind these gifts:
According to the pleasure of God's will. According to the riches of God's grace.
According to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ. According to the purpose of
God who accomplishes all things. According to God's counsel and will.

Then, in case you missed it, there is a response called for from the recipients
of such unmerited grace: To be holy and blameless before God in love. To the
praise of his glorious grace. So that we might live for the praise of God's glory. To
the praise of God's glory.

God has chosen us and God blesses us in abundance. Not because of who we
are. But because of who God is. This is OUR INHERITANCE. And praise is the
best response we can give.

I know that many - if not most - of my sermons emphasize our
responsibilities as Christians to serve *the least of these*, and to *love our neighbor as
ourselves*. I haven't changed my mind; I still believe in giving greater attention to
God's expectations of us over and above God's blessings. However, we also need
to remember - especially as we grow older - that praise is enough.

Another commentary I read on this passage was clear in explaining, “In the face of God’s eternal choice on behalf of humankind, in the face of God’s revelation of his Son, Jesus Christ, in the face of God’s grace, the only appropriate response is one of praise.” Furthermore, pointing to Christianity in North America, this commentary states, “Our thoroughgoing pragmatism inclines us to respond to the claim that God has acted on our behalf with the question, ‘What are we to *do*?’ If we stand in God’s debt, then we understand ourselves to be obliged to pay back the amount owed. The text, however, stipulates no repayment, for the debt can never be paid. Instead, the exhortation is to give God thanks and praise. To our way of thinking, this is no response at all, and yet it is fundamental to our existence as God’s creatures. The reading of Ephesians should prompt us to recall the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism, that the chief end of human life is ‘to glorify God, and fully to enjoy [God] forever.’” (*Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year B*, ed. Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome)

At a movie such as *Knives Out*, we enjoy cheering when the good guys win and the bad guys lose. But when it comes to OUR INHERITANCE of God’s amazing, unconditional, and boundless grace, no one is cut off. Grace is not limited to the United States of America, to our particular denomination, to those who vote

like we do, to any particular race, color, creed, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

No one is beyond the reach of God's grace. To the praise and glory of God!

AMEN.