

Ephesians 1:3-14
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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The Hidden Design of God

In August 1996, I started a church in San Francisco, declaring that “the doors of this church are as wide as the arms of its Savior.” Over the years, we discovered that those arms are far wider than we ever imagined — the wingspan of Jesus had been vastly underestimated!

This church aspires to be a community that makes room for everyone, and that work never stops. Because we continue to listen to the whisper of God’s spirit that says “farther ... my wingspan is wider than you can imagine.”

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul is so overwhelmed by the vastness of God's love that he writes the longest run-on sentence in the Bible (verses 3-14). This letter, likely circulated among the churches in modern-day Turkey, captures Paul’s awe at the magnitude of God’s hidden design, which is the expansive nature of God's love, reach, and purpose in the world — far beyond what Paul had previously imagined.

First the expansive nature of God’s love in verses 3-8, describing how in Christ we have “every spiritual blessing,” were “chosen,” “destined,” and “adopted” — all because of God’s love. He reveals that God has always planned, “according to the good pleasure of God’s good will,” to lavish us with “overflowing grace.” Paul, once fixated on boundaries and rules, is now overwhelmed by the boundless magnitude of God’s love.

I relate to Paul’s journey, and wonder if you do too. The longer he lived, he portrays a God whose love is so much larger, wider, deeper, expansive, generous, than we can imagine.

For many of us we started with a conception of God that was very limited, but over time we, like Paul, learned that we could write a run on sentence all day long and not exhaust the love of God.

I realize I’ve had an advantage. My vocation requires me, whether I like it or not (I happen to like it) to listen to hundreds of stories. As German reformed theologian Jurgen Moltman puts it, “My own personal theology developed as I went from house to house and visited the sick.” In my case, as I sat in coffee shop after coffee shop.

Turns out listening to the stories of others will help you see the parts of Scripture

you skimmed over and never saw, and the many ways in which you are vastly underestimating the wingspan of God's welcome and love.

Which begs the question, are you making room in your life to listen to the stories and experiences of others?

When was the last time you said to someone "I'd love to hear your story?" As many of you could verify if you have met with me, I ask that question a lot.

Listening to someone's story holds great power. It creates space for people to feel seen and heard, fostering empathy and connection. Truly listening shows that their experiences matter, breaking down barriers, expanding our perspectives, and revealing our shared humanity.

Listening is an act of love and solidarity. In the coming months, I imagine us getting a lot of practice in this as we seek to listen to Willow Glen, to one another, and to God's spirit as we chart our future course.

Which leads us to the expansive nature of God's reach (verses 9-10).

"God revealed his hidden design to us, which is according to his goodwill and the plan that he intended to accomplish through his Son. This is what God planned for the climax of all times: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth."

That last phrase — to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth — what does that mean? Well, first there is the word "all." I like to joke that in the Greek, "all means all."

Ironically the church has used Ephesians 1 to say some are chosen and some are, as my dad used to say "SOL," missing Paul's effusive wonder at God's grace that is "to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth."

Why should we be surprised that God's hidden plan transcends the tribalism and divisions of this world? In Christ, God says, "You all fall into my merciful hands, and I am bringing all things together, whether you understand it or not!"

I'm reminded of 14th century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich saying: "Our soul is naturally rooted in God in endless love."

In some ways, the work of any church is to believe that and live that out. Our work is to believe it ourselves about ourselves, to believe this about others, and to invite others to that same grounding reality. To that same awareness.

But why? There is expansive purpose to God's love. Verse 11 says we have "received an inheritance" and are called to be "an honor to God's glory". What do you do with an inheritance? You invest it, you pass it along to others, if you are wise with it.

I look at Stone Church of Willow Glen as an inheritance that you have invested in, and now must pass along to others. What does it look like for you to prepare this church for future generations to experience the community, support, and spiritual growth you have? What does it look like for you to give generously of your resources so that we can continue to see what God will do through us in Willow Glen and beyond?

Do you believe in the expansive nature of God's love for you, personally? What would it mean for your life for the dominant narrative to be that you are the beloved child of God. That God is wholly present with you in every breath, every laugh, every tear? That you are known and loved and capable of love?

Do you believe in the expansive nature of God's reach? Have you felt burdened by despair or hopelessness? Can you hear God calling you to something greater, beyond our current anxieties? How might trusting in God's promise to "bring all things together in Christ" lift the weight of hopelessness in your life today?

And do you believe in the expansive nature of God's purpose in this world? Have you become self-obsessed, over-Facebooked with anxiety — like me frankly — and lost sight of joining God in God's renewal of all things? What step might you take today to internationalize joining God in this work? Here's where I'm tempted to tell you to apply this sermon today by volunteering with ministries you resonate with during our Kickoff BBQ ... so I will say that!

Do you believe this good news, better than we can imagine? Some days I do, and some days I don't. Yet, since Paul speaks to all of us in this message, together we can believe and step into God's intended future — revealing and embracing the hidden design God has for us.

Amen.