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The Jesus Way | Gather

Ephesians 1:1-10

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Trail Ridge Road Redemption

There are certain people who live and walk among us who take great pleasure in restoring things. They take great pleasure in reclaiming things. Furniture, cars, houses, things made from brass, things made out of steel or wood.

We have tv shows about this, auctions and events celebrating the restoration – celebrating the fact that there are those that walk among us who see beyond the effects of neglect, accidents or just basic wear and tear and they can see a way back – a redemption of sorts.

The same is true for lived experiences – we all have stories of the effects of neglect, accidents, mistakes or just basic wear and tear in our lives. And in each of those stories we pray and hope for a way back – redemption.

Some of these stories are major – pivotal to the health and wellbeing of the one who experiences it and, some of these stories may not be that major but still important enough to shape us. The difference is usually determined by who is telling the story. And because this first story is mine to tell I have determined that it is quite pivotal to my health and wellbeing.

A couple of years ago I had the traumatic experience of driving the death trap that is called Trail Ridge Road in Rock Mountain National Park outside Estes Park Colorado. We were lured, yes lured by descriptions of beauty and majesty. Dare I even say grandeur?

They use words like trail – a very nice word – seems really safe – nice little trail. What they didn't emphasize was the word ridge or tell you how close to falling off the ridge you would be the whole time! Anyway... we, that is my family and I made it up and down... alive but my soul, my sense of self was bruised a bit and made the decision to never do that again.

Ok... so a year later we decided to go back to Estes and do more hiking but this time we invite some really old friends... you know the type of friends that you want to bring with you on a trip. There are levels of friendship you know... nothing wrong with that. These friends' kids have grown up with my kids but also these friends have done a lot of hiking all over various mountain ranges in numerous states and countries. They will guide us on some new hikes... cool. However, in order to get to the one hike that everyone agrees will be awesome... you have to take the death trap, ridgey – ridge – ridge – not a trail – road.

Now, these friends know the story of my existential crisis they year before and they keep the conversation lite and Jess assures me that she can do the drive just fine and Jay (their names are Jessica and Jason) will drive the other vehicle as we will need two vehicles as my in-laws are also with us – who are also the type of in-laws that are great to travel with... there are levels of in-laws too you know... nothing wrong with that.

Anyway – Jess has volunteered to pick up my slack if needed but I was determined to redeem my story. We had a stop planned along the way at a rest area just above the tree line what was somewhere between 50 and 60 thousand feet, so we could all use the facilities as needed because the hike was going to take most of the day. Which I thought was a good idea. About halfway up I could get out stretch my legs a bit, recalibrate, do some centering prayer if needed.

Early the next morning, Heather and I with our family head out following Jason and Jessica and their family and start the drive. Redemption here I come. So... as we are ready to pull out of the rest stop... Jess adjusts the driver seat, the side and rear mirrors and looks over at me and says "It's all good. We got this." Looks both ways and drives us safely to the hike.

Redemption seemed elusive... but maybe sometimes it is not up to us to redeem our own story. Sometimes – and maybe often – God uses others to redeem our story... and maybe that is

even more powerful. Maybe redemption is bigger and includes more than just our own stories.

It is God's Pleasure

There is a letter in the bible titled Ephesians. This letter spends a lot of time encouraging the church to remember who it is, where its identity comes from and God's overall purpose for all of creation. It's a letter that all churches should read. Makes sense. And this is how it starts –

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on 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 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:2-10 NRS)

There is a lot going on here. But let's take a look at language for a minute. When reading the bible pay attention to words that you may not see that often. Especially words that describe God. One of the first things I notice is a word that we don't particularly think about when we think about God. It's the word pleasure. This letter is telling us that God has a purpose – God has a plan, and that plan gives God pleasure. God takes pleasure, things are pleasing to God. Reminds me of the Christmas story when the angel choir shows up to the shepherds and sings "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased!" But what is giving God pleasure – what is well pleasing to God?

This is where our English translations hide a complete and total gem of a word – we translate it as gather – the word gather is not rare in the

English language. However, the word that the original Greek uses is extremely rare – so rare that it is only used once in the entire bible – as if it is so rare that it reserved for only God to use.

Ana-kephala-ios-sathai – to gather.

And what is this rare gathering – this God gathering business?

All things is what God is gathering... The Greek word is pas – and it means all things

All things – in heaven and on earth – all things.

All things – you, me, all things – good, bad the ugly. Not just a certain group of people or a certain tribe or nation.

All things... even the things or the people you don't like.

It reminds me of the parable of the net where Jesus is describing the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a net – a drag net, that catches everything but, in this case, not for judging or sorting...

This gathering is for all things. To gather all things in Christ. And to gather all things in Christ is a gathering of redemption. To be gathered up in Christ is to be redeemed.

Fullness of Time and Now

It is a beautiful vision of God – well pleased by the redemption of all things. And the writer shares with us that in the fullness of time this will happen. Yet the writer at first glance might not seem that clear on when this will happen.

But in reading the rest of this love letter you hear time and time again images of the church as the body and Christ as the head. And the body goes wherever the head goes. And the body cannot live without the head. The body is useless without the head.

³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?' ³⁸ When did we see you a

stranger and invite you in, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'I tell you the truth, just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me.' (Mat 25:35-40 NET)

Time and time again... over and over... this is where the head, where Christ goes. With the lost, the forgotten, the widows, the orphan, the immigrant, the sick, the poor. This is where the head goes but there are lots of times when the body does not follow. Christ is there but the church does not follow. This was so important that Jesus, in one of the best-known stories of all time, tries to teach his fellow Jews this. We know it as the Good Samaritan.

Are you the neighbor?

Refer to the story of the Good Samaritan.

Who is my neighbor? – Jews in a pluralistic culture – strict cultural restrictions. Jesus uses the Samaritan to reframe the question – are you a neighbor – even in a pluralistic culture. God is calling us - Ana-kephala-ios-sathai – ing us up... gathering us up into Christ for the specific purpose of entering other people stories...

As the body – in step with Christ the head... redeeming other stories. Jumping in the driver's seat of people's stories adjusting the mirrors, grabbing the wheel and saying ""It's all good. We got this.""