

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
August 11, 2019  
**Dr. Jay Howell**

***In Christ: For This Reason***  
**Ephesians 1:1-2; 3:14-19**

I am grateful for the welcome you have all given us. To those of you who have said hello to me or to Frances or to Jack, to those of you who have brought us meals or reached out by email or by card or by social media, truly, thank you. And to those of you who have planted UT stuff in my office already, thank you too.

About four and a half months ago, this congregation held a meeting to hear the recommendation of the Pastor Nominating Committee. It was taped, and Steve sent me the link, and I got to watch it later. Friends, so encouraged by your affirmation, by your faithfulness, by your confidence in the PNC, and more than that by your confidence not in me but in the Spirit's guidance. I am humbled by that call and the hold and resolve it has made on my heart and on my wife's heart.

At the beginning of that meeting, you'll remember that Susan Hyde stood up right here and announced "Jay Howell" as their nominee to be the next Pastor of Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church. And then Susan, your very next words were, "The only thing you could not like about Jay is that he is a Georgia Bulldog." And if that's news to you, I'm sorry the train has left the station. My books are already on the shelves in my office, and I'm not moving those things again. But even though it was said in jest, I get that with any new pastor's arrival, there's a curiosity, an interest, and maybe even a bit of concern, about in my case who this guy is, what's he like. Gotta admit, I have the same questions about you.

And that interest can be a good thing. As our lives grow more and more entwined, I want to know who you are. I want to know "What's your story?" "What's your history?" "What have been times of joy for you?" "What have been times of pain?" And I hope you will want to know the same things about me.

But those are not the primary questions that have gathered us today. Those questions of identity, of getting to know each other are good questions, important questions. But that's not what gathers us. Not here. The first thing that gathers us is a question of identity, yes, but it's not about who you are, and it's definitely not about who I am. It is about knowing who the Lord is and what he has made us to be. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine, but yours.

In the letters of the Apostle Paul, there's a phrase, a little two-word phrase, that is peppered throughout his writing. And that phrase is, "In Christ," or variations of that like "in the Lord" or "in him." Paul uses it all the time, in fact 164 times throughout his letters. "In Christ" over and over. Easy to gloss over. It's like a little tagline, just throw it in there. "In Christ." It's easy to say. I'll admit I'm guilty of tagging it on the end of emails sometimes just to sound pious.

And so when we come to verses like the opening verses of Ephesians, where Paul writes, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who in Ephesus and are

faithful in Christ Jesus” there’s that little phrase, “In Christ,” that you can read and just easily pass over.

And if it was just there once, maybe we could, but Paul keeps on saying it, especially in Ephesians. Over and over, Paul keeps on pinging things with the tag, in Christ, in Christ, in Christ. Says it so much that either Paul is trying to add some fluff, like a bad preacher trying to run the clock out, or this, this little two-word phrase, is something really important. So, what does it mean?

Some of you already know we arrived in Knoxville not this week but actually last week, two Mondays ago. So, all our stuff got into the house, and so it’s a bunch of boxes. The rest of that week we chipped away at things, getting a bit settled, since you know, I didn’t officially start in the church office until this past Monday. So come the weekend, last weekend, we had a choice to make, because obviously there was worship last Sunday.

So on one hand, we could’ve stayed in the house, but it would’ve been a bit weird, you know, because we live across the parking lot, to sit out up on the back staircase with my morning coffee as folks were coming in for church, and just, I don’t know, wave and “You stay classy.” Would’ve been weird. On the other, and this is what Susan Hyde noted for us, might’ve been a bit weird to have come in last Sunday, since today not last Sunday was when all the welcome and introductions and everything had been planned.

So, we decided just to get away for the night. And that meant we needed to put up our dog, so we got a dog sitter. Small catch though when we tried to take our dog to the dog sitter’s house. We couldn’t find the leash. We had the little harness we used for him while we drove over from Memphis, but we couldn’t find the leash. Still don’t know where it is. Had to go buy a new one. It’s somewhere in the house, and it’s probably in one of those boxes. **In** one of the boxes. Maybe that’s what it means to be “in Christ.”

In the 2001 cinema classic *Zoolander*, the male model Hansel is tasked with retrieving some very important files off a computer hard drive. And Hansel’s a dummy. He doesn’t know what to do, until he’s told that the files are *in the computer*. And then he looks at the computer with wide-eyed epiphany, “They’re in the computer. It’s so simple.” He grabs the computer and a little later, he lifts up the whole computer, declares to the evil villain, “We’ve got 30 years’ worth of files, right here in this computer. And they’re gonna bring you down.” And throws the computer off a balcony, thinking that the files, the actual physical files, would spill out onto the floor. And when the computer just smashes into a bunch of electronic bits, he says, “Where’d all the files go?” Maybe that’s what it means to be “in Christ.”

There was an Anglican priest named John Stott, a pretty influential voice within the church in England and in the US in the past century. And in one address, in fact the National Prayer Breakfast one year in DC, he picked up on this phrase “in Christ.” He said this,

“To be ‘in Christ’ does not mean to be inside Christ, as tools are in a box or our clothes in a closet, but to be organically united to Christ, as a limb is in the body or a branch is in the tree. It is this personal relationship with Christ that is the distinctive mark of his authentic followers....

What distinguishes the true followers of Jesus is neither their creed, nor their code of ethics, nor their ceremonies, nor their culture, but Christ. What is often

mistakenly called 'Christianity' is, in essence, neither a religion nor a system, but a person, Jesus of Nazareth."

What he's saying is that when it comes to this question of identity, this question of who we are, this matter of getting know one another, it's not just about you getting to know me, or me getting to know you. It's that we will come to know each other more deeply and more truly than we can possibly imagine if we first seek to know the Lord and what it means to be in Him. When we come to know the Lord, we get to know who we really are, and what we are made to be.

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is often thought to be in two halves, with some calling the first three chapters the Letter of Doctrine, because it's more theological, and then calling the last three chapters the Letter of Ethics because it's more about application. And granted, that's kind of arbitrary. It's not like Paul wrote the thing and said, "Behold, so beginneth the Letter of Doctrine." But yeah, roughly speaking there's something of a transition, and at the end of three chapters in Ephesians, there's a summation of all Paul has been saying about God and Christ and forgiveness and salvation and the church, these identity questions about what it means to be "in Christ."

And he closes this so-called Letter of Doctrine with a prayer. Starting in v. 14 in chapter 3,

"For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Paul opens this prayer by first telling us why he's offering it. He says, "For this reason." And it's always good to pay attention to those little transition words. So, when he says, "For this reason," he is pointing to everything that he has shared up to this point, everything about God about Christ about salvation about the church, and he says "Because of all of that," I bow my knees before the Father and offer this prayer.

And it's the all of that, all of what Paul has shared about God and Christ and salvation and the church, all of these questions about identity and who we are, all of that is what I hope will be the focus of our worship for about the next month and a half, during which we'll be moving through these first three chapters of Ephesians.

I wanted to start here at the end, even before we've gotten to know each other, first, so that you know why. So that you know from the get-go what the point is of all this talk of God and Jesus and being in Christ.

I wanted to start here, because I know that folks are here for any number of reasons. I know that some of you, many of you are here this morning, and for you being "in Christ" or knowing Christ is precisely what drives you, what defines you. And for that I praise the Lord. I praise the Lord for the faith that is in you and for the generations and the leaders that have served the Lord in this church.

But I suspect there are others of you here, and for you the whole thing of knowing Jesus or being in Christ or having faith or whatever way you want to put it, it really doesn't have much

meaning or appeal to you. Maybe it once did. Maybe it never did. Maybe you're here to support your spouse or to make your parents happy, or because you think it'll help you raise your kids better. Those aren't the worst reasons in the world to be here, but it might mean that every week you sit out there in the pews, you feel a little uneasy because you're not really sure you believe all this stuff.

Maybe you're here this morning, and you don't know why you came. Just woke up and felt some longing, some restlessness, maybe even some kind of pain. And you hoped you might find some comfort here, even though you don't know what that would even look like.

I wanted to start at the end of this chapter, because for whatever reason, I know that some of you are thinking right now, "Okay preacher, you said all this about being 'in Christ,' but who cares? Why does it matter?"

This is why.

It's because you already know a lot. You already know the pain you've had to endure, at the hands of a loved one, at the hands of a friend, at the hands of the church even, pain in loss, pain in grief, pain of years long past, pain of something yesterday. You already know this.

You already know the brokenness of the world. You look around and you see right in front of you, you see on the news, whether in our communities, or in our country, or around the world, and you see so much tainted by hatred and hunger or violence and vitriol. You already know this.

And you already know your own shortcomings. You may know them because of guilt that has been on your shoulders for longer than you can remember, or because you are just now feeling their sting. You already know this.

You already know a lot. You already know the pain you've born. You already know the injustice you've seen. You already know your faults and your failures, and you will surely get to know mine.

You already know these things. But it is my hope, my prayer, that you might come to know something else, that you might come to know something more deeply, more broadly, something in your bones, something that no matter what you know, what you've seen, what you've done, you might come to know this first:

That there is one who loves you, and that love might come to define you, if you let it.

Or as Paul writes it, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**