

St. Francis Episcopal Church – The Rev. Rich Simpson
The Second Sunday of Christmas – January 4, 2009
Text: Ephesians 1:3-6; 15-19a

Ask any lay reader: even when the Old Testament names are unpronounceable, most of them would rather read about Melchizedek than have to read those long run-on sentences that St. Paul is so famous for. You know them when you hear them because you find yourself scratching your head at the end when the reader says “the word of the Lord” because you aren’t certain whether to respond “thanks be to God” because it is or because the reading has finally and mercifully concluded!

Today’s reading from Ephesians doesn’t seem so bad compared to some of the epistle readings we’ll get in this New Year, but that’s only because we are reading it in English! In Greek the first fourteen verses of the first chapter are one long breathless sentence, followed by a second long sentence that goes from verses 15-23. The entire first chapter of Ephesians in Greek, in other words, is just two long sentences—from which we heard about nine verses extracted today. It’s like Paul got started and just couldn’t stop. And it is one long stream of praise:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing and made us his children and has freely bestowed grace on us all and forgiven us according to the riches of his grace and lavished upon us an inheritance with the saints and so I give thanks constantly for all of you and pray that you will be given a spirit of wisdom and truth to know and serve God in all you do and with God you can do infinitely more than you can ask or imagine and so you will live in hope to the end of the ages...

The whole thing is doxology, which is a great way to begin a letter to a congregation, and a great way for a congregation to begin a New Year together.

Each Christmas and Easter season, Jill and I divide the list of shut-ins and we go out to take them communion and goodie bags put together by one of our church angels. Those visits are always a joy that renews my faith. I am constantly amazed at the wisdom of people who are very often facing difficult challenges and loss, yet who in the midst of great hardship continue to bear witness to the joy and goodness of life. They are inspiring, and it truly takes my breath away to be in the presence of people who sound so much like St. Paul not because they are intentionally mimicking him but because their own faith has brought them to a very similar place. They are grateful and count their blessings daily and thank God for a community that continues to remember them.

It is the deepest form of wisdom, I think, to cultivate gratitude. But let’s face it: it’s easier to do that when the stock market is soaring and its 72 degrees outside and the days are long. I’m talking about people who begin and end each day with a simple prayer: thank you God—even when the snows fly and the future is uncertain and your back aches from the moment you wake up in the morning until you lie down at night or you can’t make it to the kitchen without a walker.

Some will tell you that the key to spiritual growth is right belief, or about how we read Scripture, or about what we do to take care of the poor. All of these things are important to faith, but too often when we view faith in these ways we implicitly suggest that those who see things differently from the way we do are not as spiritually wise or mature. Condescension in Christian community, however, is a killer. Now I suppose that could happen with gratitude as well: we might begin to think “I’m more grateful than so-and-so, so therefore I must be a more faithful person.” Such, I suppose, is the insidious nature of sin.

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But gratitude itself provides a counter-weight to that tendency because it doesn't stop with thanking God. St. Paul is thankful for the people God gives him as fellow travelers in life's journey. He takes time to say thanks for the Body of Christ as a whole and specifically for the congregations of Christians in Ephesus or Thessalonica or Rome or Corinth and for specific people in those congregations like Chloe and Timothy and Aquila and Prisca.

Each week we pray for our Presiding Bishop and Bishop by name as well as for congregations in the diocese and across the world, and closer to home we offer names of specific members of *this parish* each week of the years. Some may be our dearest friends. For many of us they are just names on a piece of paper—they attend a different liturgy than we do or sit on the opposite side of the church from us. But as our community grows in strength and fellowship, they become family, people whose lives we care deeply about. None of us is perfect. In fact in any given week there may be a name or two that you hear which makes you think, “Gosh that person really drives me crazy!” Many of us here have strong personalities and deeply held convictions about the world, God, politics, theology and sometimes this puts us at odds with one another. Some may be missing, either because they've simply gotten out of the habit of coming here or maybe they are in real pain about something. Many may not have a clue about how much they are missed. But we can take time each week in this New Year to give thanks for them—all of them—thanks for fellow travelers.

God gives us to one another to be companions along the way. I love that word: *companion*, which comes from two Latin words that literally mean, “to bread with.” I began reading a book over Christmas called *Take this Bread* by Sara Miles, about her journey from being a committed atheist to a practicing Christian. It began when she wandered into an Episcopal Church and was welcomed to the Table to receive the Sacrament. She writes in that book:

I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where even the despised and the outcasts are honored.

You can run a long way with that one sentence to what it means to be the Church in this time and place. It is tempting for us to want to exclude some—literally to *excommunicate* one another because we disagree about issues we hold dear. But God feeds us all, embraces us all, and commands us all to love one another. It is a very ordinary, and yet subversive, thing to be a Eucharistic community—which is just a fancy theologian's way of saying a “thankful community.” Week after week we take the bread and bless it and break it and give it. We give thanks to God for the fruits of the earth and for being in our midst, and we proclaim that where there is one bread, there is but one body—broken to be sure but still one.

Today is the tenth day of Christmas, a season when we celebrate the gift of God-with-us in Jesus Christ: Emmanuel. But that gift requires a response from us. God is a Giver, but as with all gifts there are three possible responses that can be evoked.

We can say “no thanks.” There are lots of variations on this: we can return the gift or let it sit in a closet until the Church Mouse Fair rolls around. But whether it is returned or unused if it is not received or valued it is of little use to us. We will have the experience but miss the meaning.

Or we can receive a gift begrudgingly. I would venture to say we all have some experience with that. “Thanks.” we mumble...but it’s not what we mean because we don’t like cardigan sweaters or we look washed out in that color or we don’t drink scotch. Our tastes are fickle and we can be polite without being truly thankful.

I suspect and hope, however, that we all have some experience at least with receiving a gift that means the world to us. It is not usually or even often about what it costs in terms of dollars—although in my experience there is a cost in the deeper sense. We treasure gifts that are given from the heart and are touched because the gift itself symbolizes a relationship: someone who knows us and cares for us and wants to express that love. When we receive a gift like that there are no words to adequately express our joy; there is no thank-you note that can express how we feel. We are transformed by that kind of gift and breathless with gratitude. It changes us at some deep level to be loved in such a way. *Thank you, we stammer...this is exactly what I wanted...I just can’t believe it, it’s perfect...*

The gift of Christmas is Emmanuel. That may not be what we expected or even prayed for. Often we want God to fix our messes or reward our good behaviors (or even to punish our bad ones so we can be reassured that there is a moral equilibrium in the world and in our lives.) We may pray that God will make us safe or secure or get us into the college we long to attend. It is quite possible to take that journey all the way to Bethlehem to behold a child and miss the point: that this God who dwells among us, very God of very God, is like us in every way save sin. Jesus is born and cries and laughs and dreams and loves and fears and doubts and hopes and wonders; ultimately he dies.

We can refuse that gift. Or we can offer a perfunctory and polite “thanks” and get back to business as usual—back to the “real world” which asks so little of us and yet takes so much from us. Or we can accept the gift that transforms our lives, this gift that changes the world. And if we dare to come and behold him, it can leave us as breathless as St. Paul, and as filled with doxology as Betty or Virginia or Ken. Gratitude transforms our lives and begins the process of making us a new creation in Jesus Christ. It opens the doorway for us to become disciples who will risk everything for Christ’s sake.

That is why the spiritual practice of faithful stewardship is one of the most important practices toward mature faith. That is why generosity of spirit and welcoming the stranger and forgiving those who trespass against us are central practices in forming disciples: because you can’t force someone to do these things out of a sense of duty or obligation. You can’t do them in order to get a get-out-of-hell-free card. Faith is about responding to grace, to what has been freely offered in Jesus. And those to whom much is given are called to become givers themselves by hoarding less and sharing more.

It makes you almost want to sing, doesn’t it? To go tell it on the mountain and over the hills and everywhere! Jesus Christ is born! It makes you want to give something back. But what can we give? Christina Rossetti posed that question in the early part of the twentieth century in the hymn, “In the Bleak Midwinter,” and this was her answer:

*What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a Wise Man I would do my part; yet what I can, I give him: give my heart.*