

*Grace, Gratitude, and Giftedness*  
The Rector's 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Address—Celebrating Ten Years of Shared Ministry  
St. Francis Episcopal Church, Holden, MA

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:*

***Grace** to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I **give thanks** to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any **spiritual gift** as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*(1 Corinthians 1:1-9)*

The opening words which we heard read today from Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth are addressed not to a *congregation* as we would imagine it, but to a group of small house-churches in modern-day Greece. Corinth is just about as far west of Athens as Holden is west of Boston. In Paul's day it was a commercial hub and a religiously diverse place where Christians were a tiny minority. In many ways that context was different from our own, but in surprising ways I think that the challenges the Church faced then were remarkably similar to those the Church faces today.

There are three words I want to highlight in these opening verses that I think speak "good news" to us as we gather today for our Annual Meeting: *grace, gratitude, and giftedness*. As we reflect on the past year at St. Francis (and to some extent the past decade I've served as your rector) I want to take each of these in turn.

*Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.* The second to last verse of this same letter reiterates this word of grace: "the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." For St. Paul the first and last word is always, literally, grace. I finally watched the film "Amazing Grace" a few weeks ago, the story of William Wilberforce. If you haven't seen it, I commend it to you. I knew a little about Wilberforce and a little bit about the hymn, "Amazing Grace"—but I confess I'd always assumed it was an American hymn, not an English one. In any event that hymn makes an important theological statement that insists that the Christian gospel is quite different than much of what passes for conventional religious piety, even in many churches. Conventional religious piety says that you are supposed to be a good person and that *if* you are a good person and you behave and follow the rules, *then* God will reward you with heaven. Conventional religious piety has a tendency to divide people into categories of insiders and outsiders, saved and damned, good and bad, clean and unclean. And that is exactly what was happening in Corinth.

But the good news of Jesus Christ turns conventional religious piety on its head: it says that all of our righteousness is as filthy rags. It insists that we *all* fall short of the glory of God and that we cannot save ourselves. Salvation comes not because *we* are good, but because *God* is. On this point both Old and New Testaments are clear: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and

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abounding in steadfast love. God's grace is so amazing it can save a wretch like me (and you!). Practically speaking, this means we are in this together. Now we are called to *respond* to that amazing grace by giving our lives back to God so that God can use us to further the aims of the Kingdom. We are called to do good works and participate with God in making all things new. But all of that is in response to God, not a way to manipulate God.

That leads to the second word that Paul offers the Church in Corinth: *gratitude*. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that he “gives thanks to God always for them, because they are living witnesses to God's grace.” We do not earn God's grace and love; all we can do is to *receive* it with gratitude. We can respond with those two little words: “thank you.” And our gratitude is not offered merely on our own behalf. It is not just that Jesus loves *me*, but that through Jesus, God has given us the gift of brothers and sisters: the gift of community.

Now the community that Paul addresses in Corinth was an absolute mess, so his gratitude clearly isn't because all of the Corinthians are nice people or because they have it all figured out or because they always behave like brothers and sisters to one another. In a normal year when Epiphany extends a little longer we'd hear more from this letter over the course of the next few weeks, but as it stands we only get one more week of it this year and then we are on to the Mount of the Transfiguration and then on to Lent. But if you sit down and read this letter and the one that follows you will see that the Church in Corinth faced the same problems that we face: liturgical disagreements, ethical disagreements, theological disagreements. But Paul gives thanks to God for all of them—those with whom he agrees and those with whom he disagrees. And we, I think, are encouraged to follow suit and to give God thanks for one another.

I was reading an article recently in *Sojourners Magazine*, an interview with the Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino who lives and works in El Salvador. Sobrino was talking about reality—addressing the philosophical question of “what is real?” in concrete ways. It is an important question not only in El Salvador but everywhere: because all kinds of ideologies and propagandas try to define reality for us. If we believe that Christ is the Truth, then we are called to be truth-tellers. But like Pontius Pilate we ask: “what is truth?” Here's one of the things Sobrino told the interviewer:

“[Unmasking *realidad* (reality)] is not only about unmasking the truth of cruel realities. If it is bad to cover up cruel things, it is worse to cover up good things. When you see goodness, if you don't want to acknowledge it or if you are not happy in its presence, then I don't see any hope for this planet. Have we seen goodness in El Salvador? Plenty! ...Goodness is so beautiful. It is without arrogance, without propaganda.”

What if gratitude is the key that unlocks a door which allows us to see the goodness that is all around us—even in the midst of pain and suffering? We do not deny that there is pain and suffering in the world and in our own lives. It is wrong to try to cover that up, and as people who see the cross as the way of life we can handle the truth. But I think Sobrino is right that it is even worse to cover up beauty and goodness and love. When we are focused on gratitude, we begin to see what is really real. And especially in the suburbs, it is so easy to fall victim to the lies of our consumer culture by thinking that what is real is our need to keep up with the Joneses. It's so

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easy to focus on what we don't have and to become envious, rather than on what we do have and become grateful.

Jesus talked a lot in his ministry about having eyes that see and ears that hear. He invited us to consider—just consider—the birds and the flowers. We are so often blind to the goodness of our lives and the world around us, especially when we are in pain. But underneath the pain there is beauty, without arrogance and without propaganda. One of the ways we can begin to see is to begin each day by saying, “thank you, God”—and I believe that it opens our eyes to reality.

Third, Paul speaks of *giftedness*. The Corinthian Church had all of the resources that they needed to do the work that God had given them to do. They are not lacking in “spiritual gifts” (or what in the original language he called “*charisms*”). Like St. Francis Church, they have lots of talent and plenty of charisma! Their problem (as anyone who has ever attended a wedding and heard the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians read aloud will remember) is that they are prone to use their spiritual gifts to lord it over one another. They are prone to use their gifts to make other Christians feel inadequate. *I speak in tongues so I'm a real Christian. I serve on the Mission Committee so I'm a real Christian. I'm on the vestry, or I pray every day, or...* Paul says they just sound like noisy gongs and clanging cymbals when they talk that way.

The challenge those first-century Christians forty miles west of Athens were facing was not that they needed *more* spiritual gifts. The challenge they were facing had to do with how to *use* those gifts in love: toward the end of building up the Church so that the Church might serve the world. And love, as you will remember, is not an abstract concept for Paul or for Christian theology. It is about being patient and kind with that jerk in the fourth pew. Love is about not being arrogant or rude or insisting on your own way even when you are absolutely certain that you are right. It is about being servants to each other, about discovering the truth together and then rejoicing in the right when we do.

So for all of its richness, I think that like any good writer, Paul has put it all out there in just the first nine verses of his letter. Even if we had six or eight weeks more to work on First Corinthians the rest would be about unpacking what it means in that real place and time—about the specifics. But the heart of the message is all before us today: *grace, gratitude, and giftedness*. It will never be easy to be the Church, but it seems to me that if we focus on these things then we'll be heading at least in the right direction.

I commend to you the written reports prepared for this year's annual meeting: my own and the wardens' try to see the big picture, but God is in the details of all those other reports about how we are trying to live out our mission and vision here. I just want to highlight a few of those things here, but I urge you to find the time to read those reports with an ear toward asking: where is it that I can share my gifts in the year ahead? How can I help us to do the work God gives us to do as a congregation?

This past year saw changes to this worship space. The work itself began hours after confirmation last spring with a tight window of about three months, and by the grace of God we pulled it off. But the even harder work of listening to many different voices and figuring out what this space

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would look like had gone on years before—going back to seeds planted by my predecessor. We returned on Labor Day weekend to this newly renovated space: the same and yet different, rooted in the past, but open to God's call toward the future. We also replaced roofs and painted the rectory and drew up plans for phase two, when we begin to work on the Memorial Garden and St. Clare House. That work continues in 2008.

As part of that commitment, and recognizing that the heart of our work is mission, we earmarked 1/10<sup>th</sup> of what we raised for God's work beyond our walls. We have begun to develop a friendship with the Anglican Church there through an organization called Cristosal. Seven of our members traveled to El Salvador in the spring and we'll hear back from them about an exciting project called *Hasta La Cosecha* ("Until the Harvest") at the Annual Meeting. This work challenges us to live even more intentionally into the Millennium Development Goals and our own mission and vision statements. Our work in El Salvador is literally about planting seeds...*until the harvest*. I commend this report to you, especially the last paragraph:

*What is overlooked in traditional assessment of need in poor communities is the need for human development to fundamentally transform a community. When people know how to organize and develop their own vision, they no longer depend on someone else to improve their lives; they do it themselves. The most primary need in the Episcopal communities is formation and training to create the base from which the people will lift themselves out of poverty. Community formation and training is integral to community development, and the pastoral vision of the missions of Usulután, to build a church founded on men and women with the training and ability to be active participants in the Anglican Communion, and not simply recipients of its good will. Supporting Hasta La Cosecha is an opportunity to participate in a very real development that begins with the very people who live in poverty and give them the opportunity to achieve from the land the justice and peace promised at the conclusion of the war.*

We said goodbye this year to Darrell and Bunny Huddleston and it would be tempting to think that with so many gifts between the two of them we would be diminished as a community. We were, and are, sad when we have to say goodbyes. But God truly is gracious, and when we look around with grateful hearts we discover that there are other gifts to be offered and used to God's glory. The Rev. Jill Williams has come to be with us and brought her incredible passion and joy and sense of humor and a pastor's heart. Jim Bourque has taken the reigns of the Mission Committee. And so the work does continue, by the grace of God because it is the work that defines us: God's mission, not our own ego needs.

*Grace, gratitude, and giftedness.* Not a day goes by when I don't look around and see evidence of these things at St. Francis. But we need to be reminding each other about where to look and how to see. This year Easter comes early, which means that two weeks from this Wednesday we'll embark yet again on our Lenten journey. And then a week after Easter I'll begin a time of sabbatical. I anticipate that time away with a sense of profound gratitude, but also as a time for this parish to stretch in new ways. I will miss you all, but promise you will be close to my heart. I am not "running away"—but stepping back to ponder and to consider and to renew. We've come a long way together over these past ten years and we continue to live into the claim we make each week at the top of our bulletins: that the ministers of this parish truly are *all* the people. That takes intentionality. When conflicts emerge or when the vision is momentarily unclear, it is

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tempting to look to the rector to provide easy answers and technical fixes. It is tempting to think the rector's job is to put out fires. But I think it's just the opposite: I have come to see my job more as one who is called to tend to the fire: to help us to live more fully into Pentecost as we burn with passion and radiate light for the sake of the world.

My hope is that in the fall of this coming year we will take some time to dream together by trying to look down the road a piece and trying to discern where God is calling us next. It would be tempting for us to rest on our past laurels—this is a relatively healthy congregation that has so much to be thankful for. But as I look back on the past ten years I find myself feeling not nostalgic about the past, but hopeful about the future. I find myself wondering what God has in mind for us as the next chapter unfolds. And I don't have the answer to that question on my own. So my hope is that over the course of the next eight to ten months we will take some time to engage one another and listen together as we ask where God might be calling us to travel over the course of the next four or five years. I want us to be able to clarify our vision and then to set some concrete, measurable goals that will help us to live into that vision. I trust it will be rooted in the past, because our heritage here is rich. But I also trust that it will help us to spread our wings and take some risks and lead us to uncharted territory because that is what ministry is all about.

All will be well if we keep first things first: and remind one another that at our beginning and end is the grace of God: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And that in between, as God's people we are called to cultivate gratitude—to say thanks as we break the bread and share the cup. And in thanksgiving we see what is really real—we come here not to escape from the world, but to more fully engage it at its deepest levels, beneath the propaganda and spin. In so doing we are freed to see and claim our own giftedness—not to deny our gifts because of a false piety that we confuse for humility, but to more boldly *use* the gifts God has given each of us in love to build up the Church.

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