

The First Sunday of Advent, which is the very first Sunday of the liturgical year, picks up where we left off last weekend. New beginnings often come from old endings. I told my spiritual director once that I was in a time of transition and he said, “Rich, all of life is transition, just one transition after another...”

It’s true, but we do well to be reminded. Some of us tend to carry around in our heads an image of what life is *supposed to be like* and along with all those sugarplums dancing around our heads, I think that is especially true in these weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. We carry around no small number of “shoulds” that we lay on ourselves and sometimes on others. Sometimes in the midst of a transition, big or small, we think the goal is to get “back” to normal. But we need to be open, in the midst of seasons of transition, to the “new normals” that come on the other side of every transition we face.

When you get married (or divorced) life is changed. When a child, or a grandchild is born; life is changed. And when that same child goes off to kindergarten or college or gets married herself, life is changed. When the nest is emptied, or a loved one dies, again life is changed. When a bishop retires or an associate rector moves into a new position, life changes. *Transitions*. Beginnings and endings; endings and beginnings. As we have come to the end of the church year, we now begin again. With signs of endings all around us, we are a people of new beginnings. And so we begin this Advent season looking back to the first coming of baby Jesus, even as we await the second coming of the King of kings.

As we begin again today, I want to have a second listen to those words we heard from the opening chapter of Paul’s First Letter to the Church in Corinth.

*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 1:3-9)*

This is good advice, I think, on how to live in the midst of transition. In fact, I want to make it even simpler on this weekend, when the tryptophan may still be working its way through our bodies. I’m going to take a red pen to Holy Scripture and give Paul what he always needed: a good editor! Some punctuation! Verses 4-7 is one long run-on sentence; but I am going to insert a period after verse four—just for today: *I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus.*

In just a few days we’ll be turning the page of the calendar to December. And you all know what that means. Fighting for a parking place at the mall and even at the Big Y. Perhaps some snow and ice thrown in for good measure. Maybe too much egg nog. And for too many of us, too many old losses kicked up; too much pain in those memories of loved ones not here. We can talk ourselves into crisis mode pretty quickly by playing old tapes. And we can get ourselves stuck there.

Or we can decide this Advent to make a new beginning, toward a new normal. We can let go of at least some of that old stuff, and begin anew, with gratitude. We can count our blessings and give thanks—not for what we wish would be but for what is. The thing about counting your blessings is that it grounds you in the present tense.

Don't worry about who has been naughty and who has been nice! Make a different kind of list: focus on those things in your life for which you are grateful and the people in your life who make you smile. Make *that* list and check it twice. Write them down and offer them to God in prayer: *I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus.*

What is really interesting about that line, if you remember what the Letter to the Corinthians is all about, is that the church in Corinth was a total mess. Paul could have said, "you guys are driving me crazy!" Because they were, and in fact he will say that at various points in this letter. He could have said, and does say, "you all need to get your act together." They were a pretty gifted lot actually; maybe too talented. They tended to be a little bit too proud and arrogant. So Paul will remind them in chapter thirteen that love is not arrogant or rude.

But he begins with gratitude. As a pastor, I don't think Paul is just buttering them up; just telling them he's thankful for them when he'd really like to wring their necks. In fact I don't think he tells them that for their sakes so much as for his own. I've been there. The longer one is in the same place, as a pastor, the more specific our thanksgivings become. We are not generically thankful for a generic congregation: we are thankful for the unique, particular "characters" who make St. Francis what it is, in all of it's glory.

I still think my all-time favorite December movie is "It's A Wonderful Life." I love that scene when George Bailey comes back home and starts seeing everything through new eyes: and now he's thankful even for his bloody lip, and that old Savings and Loan and his house and the piano playing and of course ZuZu's petals. Same stuff of his life, but transformed by gratitude.

Gratitude doesn't make everything perfect; it just means we see it through the eyes of love. Same life, same people, same stuff: but it is gratitude that makes it all wonderful. It doesn't mean there aren't ever conflicts. But you can be thankful in the midst of it all, thankful for what is—not for what you wish would be if everyone got their act together. Thankful in the midst of all of life's transitions. So I think Paul really means it: the Corinthians drive him into vertigo sometimes. But he loves them. And I imagine they loved him back.

If we begin Advent with gratitude and thanksgiving, then I believe it will make us better givers. The gifts we give may actually be more creative, and more thoughtful; not necessarily more expensive. If we begin with thanksgiving and focus on the particular people in our lives for whom we are grateful, those people whom God has given us as companions along the way, then we might find ways of expressing our genuine thanks to them. Can you imagine a better Christmas present than getting a letter from a former student, for example, who tells you why you changed her life in second grade?

I want us, as we begin Advent, to listen to Paul and to do what he did: give thanks to God for the people who mean something to us: family, friends, teachers, a neighbor who shovels our walks because they worry that we are too old to be doing that anymore; a co-worker who makes the workplace more humane or the baker who hangs a little pumpkin bread on your door every Thanksgiving, or the beekeeper who drops some local honey off at your house, or the brewer who passes along an imperial stout.

It's up to you what you do with this, but here, and now, I want to invite you to take just two minutes of silent prayer before we say the Creed today: just to reflect, to consider, to pray. To give God thanks for those people in our lives who make it real, and make it meaningful, and who give us hope.