

ENTITLEMENT AND THANKFULNESS

Sermon preached by Jon M. Walton

February 8, 2009

Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31; I Corinthians 9:16-23

K.C. Ptomey, who'll be preaching in these coming weeks, and I are members of a collegial group of about twenty five pastors who love to preach. We're not all good preachers, but we love to preach, and we have tolerant congregations.

We call our group the Moveable Feast. Moveable, because twenty years ago in our salad days we always traveled on the cheap to the seminary campus of whatever Biblical or preaching scholar was our mentor that year. *Feast* is a description of the friendship and food and laughter and free flowing spirits, as well Spirit, that make these annual week long get-togethers the meat and drink of our souls. In that one week the best and deepest laughter I experience all year pours out, shared with friends who after all these years know me through and through and tolerate if not love me still and all.

Over the years we have gone from upstart, brassy, smart-alecky know-it-alls, to somewhat more wise and not quite so smart-alecky men and women who have matured, and grown, and deepened the ties between our lives and the God whom we serve, each one with a different story of how that call to serve came to them. The heartbreaks and losses that the years have brought; the births and divorces, the tragedies of our congregations and the failures as well as triumphs in our lives have been the common soil out of which our roots have become intermingled. It's hard to tell any more where the borders of our lives end and the connections to these dear friends begin. Over the last couple of weeks as I have prepared for tomorrow's surgery, some of these friends' emails and notes and conversations have made real to me what it is to be surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Time has passed and as we have gotten longer in the tooth, several members of our group have taken prominent positions of leadership in the Presbyterian Church. Two of our number became teachers of preachers, three became seminary Presidents, three are serving in prominent New York City avenue churches, one of our number was a candidate for moderator of the General Assembly (that was K.C.), another is pastor of a 5000 member church in Kansas of all places, others of us serve more modest congregations, or are in college chaplaincy, and some newer members are just starting out in ministry, having babies, writing poetry, working on doctorates, serving in backwater places where no one would much notice save for the excellence of the gifts of the pastor that is serving them.

There are obviously a lot of things that I could say about this group, but one of the things that I would never say about them is that for all of their accomplishments, for all of their potential and promise and giftedness there are none of them who live life with a sense of entitlement. None of them feels as if life owes them anything, but instead they live life grateful for all that they have seen and heard and known as blessing in their life.

Now this kind of thankfulness for what we have, and what we are given, is not a trait that we see much of lately. The world measures success by more tangible things than good friendship and shared experiences.

Our worries about money have set off a firestorm of entitlement and a grasping after gain with every man or woman for themselves. Bernie Madoff is an example of the kind of greed that puts self-interest above honest dealing. Would anyone ever trust his word about anything again?

Entitlement is John Thain's \$1400 wastebasket and \$35,000 commode. It's Detroit's CEO's begging for federal dollars while flying to Washington in private jets. Entitlement is Rod Blagojevich selling a Senate seat to the highest bidder. It's Tom Daschle's \$5M cash in on his Senate prestige and his forgetfulness with the IRS about the value of his car and chauffeur, while the rest of us have to drag all our supporting records down to the IRS office for an audit over a \$500 contribution to the church.

This sense of entitlement has hardened us in other ways as well. Little things. The attitude of entitlement is the Mercedes in front of you that keeps nudging into the lane and threatening to slice off your bumper as you creep your way into the Lincoln Tunnel.

Entitlement is the neighbor upstairs whose radiator leaks and causes you several thousand dollars in repairs, deductible from your policy, and she doesn't even offer an apology. She doesn't even bring down some chocolate chip cookies as a peace offering, but I digress.

Entitlement is the opposite of gratitude. It gives thanks for nothing, but claims all as its own.

Now entitlement is not just a Washington or New York attitude. Even in Corinth, Paul had to address the issue of entitlement, that sense of the world owing me everything I get and while I get it, everybody get out of the way. Listen to his advice in the 9th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians.

"Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all... To the Jews I became a Jew...to those under the law I became as one under the law...to those outside the law I became as one outside the law...to the weak I became weak...I have become all things to all people..." And then he says, almost as an afterthought, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."

Paul wants us to know that what delights him most is not making others come to him, but going to others, reaching out to them, speaking their language, understanding life from their side of things, becoming like them, even as Christ became like us. “All this I do,” he said, “for the sake of the gospel.”

You have to admire that in someone, don't you think? To be so in love with life, and so aware of others, and so grateful for what you have received that you are willing to extend yourself in such a way as to share generously what you have been given so abundantly.

Over the last thirty years I have served four wonderful congregations, each one unique and each one so kind to me. And as is often the case in ministry, in times good and times bad, it is the congregation who becomes the example to the pastor, and who in acts of kindness and generosity actually live out the faith that we preachers talk about week after week.

That seems to have been Paul's experience too. “I do it all,” he said, “for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessing.” No sense of entitlement there. No declaration from Paul saying, “You folks owe me something.” Just the opposite!

“I have made no use of any rights,” he said, “but I have become all things to all people...for the sake of the gospel...so that I may share in its blessings.”

And it seems to me that that is where we really come to understand what motivates Paul, his sense of gratitude and thankfulness. Thankfulness that his life is given over to the work that it is, that he knows and loves the people he has come to know and love.

And this is no small thing, you know. Paul had a checkered past. The great joy of his life before his dramatic conversion was to be a heat seeking missile aimed at every Christian heart. He was, in a sense, a religious terrorist. A Pharisee who hated Christians and consented to their death. He was party to the martyrdom of Stephen, and he took no small delight in finding and binding over followers of Jesus whom he believed were betrayers of the faith.

But then came the Damascus road experience and his conversion, and his life did a 180, quite literally, such that on anyone's list of the most influential and important Christian theologians of all time, Paul is perhaps the best known.

It was not always easy for him. Those churches he started sometimes questioned his authority and his motives, they strayed from his teaching, they wore him down. He was so spent by some of them that he virtually cursed at them. “Shall we sin the more that grace abound? He roared at the Romans. “God forbid,” he said!

Exasperated by the Galatians, he shouts at them, “You foolish Galatians, who has put a spell on you? The only thing I want to hear from you is this: Did

you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? How stupid can you be?"¹ *You go Paul!*

And then, for the sake of the Corinthians he remembers that it was never easy; "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times shipwrecked; for a night and a day adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, from bandits, from my own people, from Gentiles, danger in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, ...I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." So he wrote, and so it was. It wasn't easy being Paul.

Still he says, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in its blessings." Paul would have had every reason to hold a grudge against God for all he's been through, all the heartache, all the sorrow; but no. He is full of gratitude, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in its blessings."

Today we're going to ordain officers to serve in the church. And it is the most Presbyterian thing we can do, to ordain these people whom we know, entrusting to them our spiritual nurture and care, our pastoral encouragement and healing. Our worldly treasure and stewardship of resources.

It was Charles I of England who said, "There is nothing more dangerous than a Presbyterian fresh off his knees." And so we will ask these elders and deacons to kneel for prayer, and we will ordain them to their calling. And they will learn in their own experience the meaning of Jesus' words, "whoever wants to be first among you must be the servant of all."

They will put in hours and hours on committees and gather for meetings for which there will be no credit save the satisfaction of knowing that they are fulfilling their responsibility.

And lest being an officer in the church sound a bit like the thankless job of being on the board of your co-op, let me say that it is also a deeply religious thing to do as well. To care for the souls of people, to provide for their spiritual welfare, to stand by them in joy and in sorrow, to mark and note the occasions and passages of life, to approve baptisms, and to record deaths, to offer prayer for the sick, to celebrate births, to serve communion, to work for the common good of the congregation. These are all profoundly important things to do. You new officers, we set you aside to a special responsibility.

But in a larger sense it is the calling of each of us to care for one another to be ministers to one another, to hold each other in prayer, to rejoice at one another's rejoicing, and to weep at one another's weeping, to work for the building up of the whole body. Most especially this is so in these coming weeks

while I am recuperating from surgery. So take good care of one another, support and nurture these new officers as they support and nurture you.

It has been many years now since a particular visit I made to a person in another church who had been nominated to serve as an elder. In this particular case I was asked by the Nominating Committee to go and invite the person to accept the committee's nomination.

He was a professor at a college, a distinguished man, younger at that time, as we all were, but a man of much accomplishment, published, respected in his field.

When I told him that the Nominating Committee of the church would like him to serve as an elder, he said something that I have never forgotten. He said, "Well it's about time. I've served on committees and pledged and volunteered on work days. My kids have been in nursery school, and I've sold cookies at the bake sale, but nobody's ever really recognized how much I've done for this church. It's about time."

He accepted the nomination, needless to say. And he lasted a little under a year, and decided that being an elder was too much work and not enough credit. And he resigned in disappointment.

In truth, I think he was finished right after he said, "Well, it's about time." There is an honor to the thing, but the honor is in the servanthood, the self-sacrifice and giving, because therein the blessing lies.

Paul said, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in its blessing." It's *all* blessing to Paul. All the hours, the work, the traveling, the going to places he might never have gone, the being with people that he had formerly persecuted, the work he did for folks that before that time he had called "unclean." "I do it all for the sake of the gospel," he said, "so that I may share in its blessings."

My colleague Michael Lindvall, at Brick Church and a fellow Feaster with K.C. and me, writes,

"It is my experience that there are two kinds of people in this world. More accurately, you and I are always being pulled in two radically different ways of being human beings. Those two ways of being are *thankfulness* and *entitlement*.

Those...who live life by the light of entitlement...see everything through the lens of "I am owed." I am owed my generous share of everything. I am owed health. Life is a right not a blessing. I deserve it, and if it isn't handed to me, I'm going to take it however I can [get it].

Then there are those who live life as a gift, and at our best, we are pulled in this direction. We tend this way when we remember that, at the end of the day, it's *all* a gift; everything is simply grace.²

Well, let me say that in these past days, I have been reminded so profoundly that it's *all* a gift. All of life is a gift. I have received grace upon grace from so many people in so many ways. People from former churches reaching out to me in dear and tender telephone calls and emails.

A message from John Buchanan at Fourth Church in Chicago that was more gracious and praising than I deserve. Twenty-three people who've given blood for me at the hospital, so many that they don't even ask people who they're giving blood for any more, they just smile and say, "You're here to give for Dr. Walton aren't you?" K.C. coming to preach for these next weeks. Offers of prayer and support in the coming days, Barbara and Sarah and Mark and Betty Jones, and Fatima and Nathan, and all of you who have made things so much easier for me to step away. My family being here and standing beside me.

I am embarrassed by the riches of love that have showered upon me. And this week as I visited with little Amelia Scheffs Bevington undergoing treatment at Sloane Kettering and took communion to Audrey Calhoun in home hospice care at the Hallmark, I was reminded that I am not alone either in inhabiting a vulnerable body, nor singular in the perils I face. Which is why it is so important that you continue to share with one another the good news of God's love that is given to us in Jesus Christ. It is what binds our lives together, and it is our deepest hope and greatest blessing.

By this time tomorrow morning I will have drawn close to that liminal place where the light of God's love meets the message of the angels who stood at the empty tomb saying, "Do not be afraid."

I do so with thankfulness that the church has a great leader, which is Jesus Christ its great head, and that we are Presbyterians and have strong leaders who have emerged from the midst of the congregation to serve and guide us, and that because all is blessing, all will be fine. As Julian of Norwich put it so beautifully, "all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well."

Paul was right you know. It's all a blessing. Every breath we breathe, every sunrise, every sunset, every child, every step we take, every thing we see, the world alive. It's all a blessing. And the only rightful thing to do is to give thanks.

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¹The last sentence is my translation of Gal. 3:3.

²Michael Lindvall, Moveable Feast paper, unpublished. Comments for 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 6-7.

