

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/July 5, 2015

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In July, 1776 in Philadelphia at the Continental Congress, meeting in what we know now as Independence Hall, John Adams spoke with what others described as such power of thought and expression that he moved them right out of their seats. Adams himself would say that he had been carried out of himself, “‘carried out in spirit,’ as enthusiastic preachers sometimes express themselves.” It is what the Prophet Ezekiel must have felt when, as he described it, “a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet.”

Ezekiel proclaimed God's message to a people in exile in the year 594 BCE by the Chebar River southeast of Babylon. God commissioned Ezekiel to make sense of this exile to the people there and help them cope with it. But more than that Ezekiel was to point beyond the exile to a new future. Ezekiel is to speak whether his words met with success or failure, for God describes the people he is addressing as impudent and stubborn! There is no guarantee of success.

John Adams also spoke with no guarantee of success. Congressman John Dickenson retorted that to declare independence from Britain would be akin to braving “a storm in a skiff made of paper.” Still, the aspiration of equality, freedom, life and happiness was enough to draw the members of Congress to declare their independence.

Ezekiel's dream of a new future and John Adam's call for independence have got me thinking of two lines in the Lord's Prayer that I have often wondered about. They are: “on earth as it is in heaven,” followed immediately by “Give us this day our daily bread.” Is the emphasis on earth, or is it on heaven? Do we condemn ourselves by falling short on earth of the glory of heaven? Certainly we are as rebellious, impudent and stubborn as the

Israelites. Is that what the prayer is about, and is it out of this want or lack that we ask for daily bread? That seems to me a rather static way of looking at the Lord's Prayer.

I think the Lord's Prayer is more about the future than about the present. The emphasis is more on heaven than on earth. We are a people of hope. We strive, we press on, toward what has been revealed to us of heaven. We yearn to transform the earth so that it looks more like heaven. That is a task that demands the sustenance of daily bread.

Paul discovered something of heaven in a mystical vision that likely occurred in the year 43, ten years after Jesus' crucifixion. He was taken up into the third heaven which in Jewish belief was the highest heaven of all. Paul got as close to God as one could possibly get. I wonder what he saw. He said he "heard things that are not to be told." It was beyond words. What he saw was beyond what any of us could attain on our own. Even with everyone working together it was more than could be achieved. Paul felt elation. This was *not* a unique event in his life. He said he had exceptional revelations, plural.

Paul felt such union and oneness that he called it being in Christ. Caught up in the closest presence of God, Paul experienced such assurance, energy, and grace beyond words. When we pray "on earth as it is on heaven," we desire unity in a fragmented world. We yearn for assurance when this weekend we are warned about levels of threat. We hope to transform earth to become more like heaven. We want to transform our own lives as well. The way to do this was as surprising to Paul as it is to us.

Rather than escape division and threat, we are to enter into them. Instead of living a life of elation and denial of sorrow we are to face into pain. Paul says he was given a thorn in the flesh. This is not what Paul expected. We do not know what it was. Did he have epilepsy? Did one whose calling was to preach Christ have a stutter? We just don't know. We do know that Paul prayed three times to have this condition removed. There would be no escapism, no denial. Instead, God's response famously was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." This is Jesus' prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." Give us sufficient grace.

Our prayer is to transform the earth in the direction of heaven. When Paul was drawn as close to God as one could possibly get, he found overwhelming unity and assurance. The way there though was to enter into the mystery of the cross and resurrection. God's power is made perfect on the cross. God's love is stronger than death. God's life energy breaches every wall of division. We have only to enter into the world's weakness, and our own. When all the resources we have to lean on are taken away God's power is shown at full force.

For Jesus what is taken away in this morning's gospel is the support of his community. They took offense that wisdom and healing could come from a mere carpenter. Surely such a one could not reveal so fully God's truth. His hometown dismisses him. Jesus is left to depend solely on God. "Give us this day our daily bread." It would be no different for those who follow him. Jesus sends out the twelve. They are to wear sandals as does Jesus. They are vulnerable, dependent upon others' hospitality, and they will not always be welcome. They too will be left to depend on God.

Paul was as close to God as one could get. Jesus was closer. Ezekiel was jolted to his feet. John Adams was carried out of himself. They all saw something of God's presence; some more clearly than others. Jesus was so close to God he called God "Father." It was complete union. "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). His vision is the unity of all (John 17). Paul discovered overwhelming, blessed, assurance. Ezekiel was given the vision of a new future; and John Adams the prospect of freedom. These things of heaven are what we yearn for on earth. We pray "on earth as it is in heaven."

But the next words are: "Give us this day our daily bread." We need God's sustenance if we are to press on toward a heavenly wonder that is too great for many to grasp. "Give us this day our daily bread." We need God's energy. The earthly path ahead, if we are to follow Christ's transformative way, is too difficult for many to walk. "Give us this day our daily bread." The way to life, assurance, and a future of freedom is the way of the cross. Give of self for the life of others, face into loss ourselves, identify with the weak, and find the perfect power of God. Trust it. Let it jolt us to our feet. We pray for a

future on earth as it is in heaven. And to get there – “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Amen.