



Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost 18

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

It has been said that we do not value what we have until we lose them—the relationships we have, the jobs we have and even the life we have. More often than not, we seek to soothe our egos by seeking variations of what we lost. We hate to lose, but losing reminds us that nothing is given. Nothing is free. The moment we lose our sense of gratitude is the very moment we begin to hold on to old visions of who we are as autonomous people who believe that freedom is merely the surrender to appetite. Those who take life and others for granted fail to acknowledge that our gift to each other is to see the terrific gift in the other at all times and in all circumstances, and not when we are in some difficulty, as was the case of the manager who was about to be fired from his job.

See, a grateful heart believes and affirms the idea of the Giver and the Receiver. The grateful heart believes in a two-way street that establishes a relationship between the Giver and the Receiver. The psalmist recounts this relationship when he argues that the fact that God was high up in the heavens did not stop God from stooping low to our human level to identify with Himself with the poor, weak and the vulnerable but also to build relationship with humans.

Indeed, if there is no one to receive, what will become of the gift of the giver? Or if there is no one in need of help, what will become of your desire to help? The one who receives proffers meaning to the one who gives. In a sense then, God the giver needs you and me, and to those whom He blesses to offer meaning to the gifts and blessings He gives to us. God needs us to offer meaning to what it means to be God.

The grateful heart believes in accountability, and solely because of that he or she does not spare a moment in managing that which has been entrusted to his or her care. That explains why Timothy bids us to even pray for those who rule over us, because we don't want them to lose that sense of gratitude that engenders accountability.

The grateful heart's ability to be faithful over a little opens him or her up to be entrusted with more. The more is not wealth, but a life rich with meaning and value.

You know, when our intellect learns to recognize a gift for what it is, when our will learns to acknowledge a gift, when our feelings appreciate a gift, ever wider circles of mindfulness make our world come alive. That is why the prophet Amos cries out in frustration over those whom God had favored in so many ways. The prophet is upset over those who are using the gifts God has given them to rip off the vulnerable poor.

The grateful heart does not dwell on the illusion of independence—for what does it mean to be independent anyway? We all depend on someone or something. The grateful heart, rather, thrives on interdependence. This is because the bonds of interdependence are those that set us free, free to acknowledge our dependence on the Ultimate Giver. For me, the circle of gratefulness is not complete until the giver of the gift becomes the receiver: a receiver of thanks. And if you ask me, that is all that God demands of us—people who are grateful enough to acknowledge that even in our brokenness, God still honors our gratitude.

There is a story of two men who shared a room in a hospital. One was Mr. Taylor, and the other was Mr. Brown. Mr. Taylor's bed was by the window while Mr. Brown's bed was by the door. They became friends of sorts and liked to chit-chat. Every morning, Mr. Brown would call out to Mr. Taylor, "Good morning Mr. Taylor, how does it look outside?" Mr. Taylor would respond, "It is beautiful outside, the sun is up, there are lots of people outside, I can see children playing and others simply enjoying the beauty of the day. It is so beautiful outside." Mr. Brown relied on these daily anecdotes from Mr. Taylor until one morning, when he called out to Mr. Taylor, there was dead silence. He called out again, but there was no response. Out of sheer panic, he pressed his emergency button.

A nurse came running into the room. She asked, hello Mr. Brown, are you alright? What may I do to help you? Mr. Brown responded that he was alright. Well, if you are alright, why did you press the emergency button? Where is my roommate Mr. Taylor? He asked. The nurse replied that Mr. Taylor unfortunately passed away in the middle of the night. Mr. Brown's eyes began welling up with tears. The nurse became worried, and tried to console Mr. Brown. He then said to the nurse, Mr. Taylor used to give me daily updates on what was going on outside.

The nurse suddenly became surprised, what did you say he did? She asked. Mr. Brown repeated that because Mr. Taylor's bed was by the window, he could see outside, and so he used to share with him all that he saw was going on outside. The nurse's surprise turned to amazement, she then blurted out "But Mr. Taylor was blind" He was blind. How could he have told you what he saw, when he could not see? Mr. Brown's sadness turned into surprise. You mean Mr. Taylor was blind? So, why was he sharing these stories with me? But out of his disappointment emerged a dose of awareness, a new sense of gratitude. Mr. Brown could not help but to thank Mr. Taylor for providing him some sense of life beyond the dreary walls of their hospital room. Mr. Brown knew that presence is the present we give to each other, and that was what Mr. Taylor gifted him.

You know, the greatest gift we can give is thanksgiving. In giving gifts to others, we only give what we can spare but in giving thanks, we give ourselves. The act of bringing Samuel for baptism is an expression of gratitude. But no Christian ritual expresses our common sense of gratitude than the gift of gathering at the table of the Eucharist as adults, children and even babies like Samuel. We come to the table of thanksgiving not as perfect or righteous people, but as broken and fallen and desiring of God's mercy.

Jesus tells the gospel story to lift up the idea that as dishonest as the manager was, he was honest enough to accept his own vulnerability; that he wasn't strong enough to dig, and was too big to beg. In other words, he could not save himself, he could not depend on himself and he could not help himself. He had to depend on the goodness and benevolence of others. But he knew one thing, that the grateful heart is always desirous of sharing, and so those to whom he gives, those to whom he extends favors, would be grateful enough to extend the same favor to him. Although he could not count on himself, he could count on those who owed his master to welcome him.

Our penchant for independence is in part fueled by our belief in self-sufficiency. But self-sufficiency renders impossible any experience of a relationship with God. If this manager could not count on himself, we too cannot count on ourselves, but can count on Jesus-the one who according to Timothy acts as the mediator between God and humans and through whom relationship with God is made possible.

You cannot worship God and wealth or Mormon. Jesus said. Unfortunately, we have often been led to believe that by camping outside the Apple Store overnight for the new iPhone 7 plus, all will be alright. But that is a symptom of human restlessness. C. S. Lewis noted that “If I find in myself desires which nothing in the world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” Having more Mormons or wealth do not leave us fulfilled or content, they cannot and do not fill the hole we want to see filled in our lives. St. Augustine in the 4th Century said it best when he wrote that “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” That hole can only be filled by the One to whom we turn in gratitude. It is only in God do we find meaning, and as St. Augustine said elsewhere, God is more in me than I am to myself.” In finding God, we find our meaning, and it is only at that point do we find rest.

As we welcome you back from a rather hot summer, the invitation is to allow God to come to term in you. Allow yourself to be wooed by the God who desires no more than a heart full of gratitude. Amen.