

Scripture: Ephesians 1:15-23

1:15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason

1:16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

1:17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,

1:18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,

1:19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

1:20 God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,

1:21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

1:22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,

1:23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Proclamation of the Word

It is almost that time of year when we ponder where we have been and what is ahead for a new year. In January, many of us will look back and then set new resolutions for the year ahead. Some we'll keep; some will be fleeting. You and I will receive year-end statements that report to us what has happened on all our accounts. And if you are students, you will receive grades for the last semester as one semester comes to a complete close. And when those grades come, the grade books will be closed, at least on this chapter, this semester. Some of you will look back and ponder what you did and what needs to be done next time. The grade report may cause some to consider moving in a different direction, a new major. Others will not even take notice and just keep swimming thoughtlessly through the sea of college life.

Well, in the church, we have come to year-end in the church calendar. Yes indeed, next week we start over with Advent season as we prepare for the coming of Jesus born in a manger for the salvation of the world. (And you can help decorate today at 2 or volunteer to light to advent wreath)

But for today, we pause at year-end and consider what has happened. We check our statements and see what God has been doing among us, working in us, the church. We remember that Jesus "rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love." And we look forward to the day when all things will be made new, all God's children will sit at that welcome table, and the world will be reconciled and at peace at the last.

Today is traditionally called Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the day we remember that Jesus Christ is still Lord. He was Lord in the beginning. He will be Lord in the end- Alleluia, Amen!

This is the day when we put things in perspective and take the long view.

Maybe this last Sunday of the church year is an opportunity for the church to reflect and ask the same sorts of questions. Have we shown Christ's love as well as we could, to as many as we could? Or have we been

swallowed up with internal conflict and distracted by busyness? Is Christ really the King of everything we do, or has something else managed to usurp Christ's place? I was ready to struggle with these questions, then I looked again at Paul's words.

Paul always starts his letters with gratitude and thanksgiving. The way it is written in *The Message* is this:

"When I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you." (*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. NRSV*)

Paul doesn't give thanks because the church is perfect and filled with perfectly holy people. Paul begins with giving thanks for the faith of the people and their love. This is not a church without troubles. If we were to read on, Paul is giving some clear instructions to address some potential divisions, potential loss of focus on calling and mission. Paul later reminds them that they are one body, born of one faith, one baptism, and one Lord. He reminds us, the Fort Hill church, of our purpose- equipping the saints for the work of ministry and the building up of the body of Christ.

But before he tells them these things, he gives thanks for them and he blesses God. Paul glorifies God first and gives thanks. What an important reminder today. That we are first called to glorify God and give thanks. If you remember our Mission Statement, it is

Glorify God, Grow Disciples and Meet Human Needs... You can see we didn't just make that up... it comes from

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is this,

Q: "What is the chief end of humankind?" Answer: To glorify God and enjoy God forever.

With gratitude and praise in our hearts, there is less room for discontent, despair, and fault-finding. We remember that our true joy is found in resting in the hands of God. Glorifying and enjoying God is another way of saying *doxology*. Every day is a doxology day, not just Thanksgiving Day or Sunday. You can praise God from whom all blessings flow any day.

Paul reminded me to give thanks for each of you,

- for those who struggle and wrestle and grow in bible study,
- for the ones who pray daily for the witness of our church and ministry in this place
- for you who make promises to raise our children in the faith and to provide a place for them to belong and to stretch.
- For you who provide a place for students who are away from home and are living the Christian faith
- For those who put faith, hope and love in action regularly
- For you who drive the bus, organize the kitchen, pay the electric bills, rake leaves, and sharpen the pencils in the Sanctuary (as one young person promised to do on Pledge Commitment Sunday).

Once I started giving thanks, I could not quit. I would have been happy to stop there, and it would be appropriate on this week of thanksgiving.

But after Paul gives thanks God for the witness of the people, Paul prays for them. He doesn't just pray for health issues and wellbeing of persons, he prays a big prayer...that we the church may know God revealed and that the eyes of our hearts would be opened to the hope of our calling. He prays that the Spirit might be at work in us, the church.

Paul prays that in light of all that is going on in our world, in our denomination, or in our lives, we can trust and depend on Jesus. "He rules the world with truth and grace...." We remember that Jesus is the head of the church and the lord of all creation. But Jesus is not a tyrant or a figurehead royal. Jesus is the Shepherd-King who came to serve and redefines power.

The profound mystery of the Christian faith is that the one who is "maker of heaven and earth" enters creation through a manger and heals it through a cross. (Elizabeth Newman in Lectionary Homiletics, Theological Reflections, November 20, 2011). Jesus comes as a Savior who was born a peasant child and was unjustly condemned to die on cross. He prayed for enemies, ate with sinners, and broke the boundaries of his religion so that the will of God might be revealed. It is this same Jesus who was raised to new life and brings new life to us, his church. And the calling of the church is to be the body of Christ...feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the fatherless and motherless, visiting the sick and dying. When we serve the least of these, we serve Jesus.

And today, we are called to glorify, to praise, give thanks, and sing a doxology. We are to remember who is lord the church and the source of our energy, intelligence, and love. Today we honor Jesus the messiah who comes not Paul writes in Ephesians when he concludes chapter one with this affirmation of faith:

All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven,

21 in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever.

22 He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church.

23 The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.

As we glorify God, give thanks and pray, let's remember this week that Jesus rules! That all things belong to Christ, especially the church, and that we are called to serve as he came to serve.