

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
November 22, 2020

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Ephesians 1:15-23

For this reason ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, "I have not stopped giving thanks for you, . . ." (Ephesians 1:15-16 N.R.S.V.)

Lest We Forget

Let me begin with a question this morning. Don't worry this is an easy question. What is something that you are likely to forget?

Some people forget where they put their car keys, or cell phone, or the remote control for the T.V. That has happened to me. One time I lost the remote control for the T.V. and just couldn't find it. Eventually I did find it. I found it in the freezer of all places. I'm still not sure how it got there.

Sometimes we forget someone's birthday, or we forget an appointment, or miss our exit off of the interstate. We all forget some things. Sometimes it is merely inconvenient. Other times it is more serious.

There is a story about Albert Einstein who was, by all accounts, both brilliant and at the same time the stereotype of an absent-minded professor. One time he called his house and the maid answered the phone. He said, "Could you tell me Dr. Einstein's address?"

She said, "I'm sorry, I can't give out that information."

He said, "This is Dr. Einstein. I have forgotten where I live."

Some of the things that we forget may seem small, but later have far more serious consequences than we first thought. I would suggest to you that forgetting to give thanks is one of those things.

In our country we have a special day set aside for giving thanks. Thanksgiving Day is coming up this week. I read with some amusement that author Charles Dickens accused Americans of celebrating this holiday all wrong. He said that we should set aside one day a year for complaining and use the other 364 days of the year to give thanks. (Dynamic Preaching Magazine, Nov. 22, 2020. Pg. 42)

Most of us would agree that Dickens has a good point. Most of us would also agree that we all

too often allow our busyness and stress to steal away our thankfulness. Even when we are in the midst of great difficulties, we are such a blessed people.

Our lesson for today is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. Paul endured all kinds of hardships. He was beaten. He was imprisoned. He was shipwrecked. He was run out of town numerous times. Yet, he retained a spirit of joy and thanksgiving in his letter.

As we look at our letter today, Paul begins by giving thanks for the faith and love of the church. It is an interesting combination, those two words: faith and love of people. True Christian faith results in love not only of God, but also of people.

There have been many people in history who loved God, but didn't love people. The pharisees of Jesus' time loved God. But their love of God and God's commandments, resulted in them holding others in contempt. The leaders of the Spanish Inquisition went around arresting and killing all of those who believed differently than they did. These Inquisition leaders loved God, but they didn't love people.

I am concerned that in our own time, our nation is developing a meanness of spirit that claims to be based in Christian faith. We have liberals making fun of conservatives and conservatives making fun of liberals. The author Jonathan Swift once wrote, "we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

We were talking about this in Bible Study the other night. Our Christian faith needs to result in love.

Now, look. I am not talking about some kind of watered down Christianity. And I am not saying that we should just go along to get along? No, of course not. We are called to bear witness to what we hear God saying to us in Scripture and by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are called to do so clearly and boldly.

But we are also called to speak with a certain humility. We are not the only ones God talks to. We don't have sole ownership of the Holy Spirit. So in our speaking and in our listening we remember that God also speaks to other people. And we remember that God may be seeking to correct us through another Christian.

We listen to others not only because God could be speaking to us through them, but also because it is one of the ways that we let other people know we care about them and think they are valuable. Listening doesn't mean we have to agree. Listening means seeking to understand.

If we are talking to someone else and our only goal is winning, proving that we are right. That conversation is not going to go very far. But if we are listening with the goal of understanding the other person, then endless possibilities begin to open up.

Here's another reason we listen. Even if the other person is wrong about a particular thing or

belief, that doesn't mean they are wrong about everything. Someone may believe that the earth is flat. But that doesn't mean they are wrong about everything.

And even if they were somehow wrong about everything, they are still people who from Christ died. So they are worth our time and our love.

One of the things that I am thankful for in this church is the way that you listen and care for each other. I am thankful for your faith in God, and in the way that faith is expressed in love. It never ceases to amaze me the way you all pitch in to help others. Last week our hygiene team put together 40 kits to be given out. We announced the need and you responded. The donations and the help poured in. Wow! I give thanks for you.

In our lesson from Ephesians, Paul tells the church at Ephesus that he is praying for them. Praying is another form of thanksgiving. It is also effective encouragement.

I know that many of you are praying daily for the church, for our church leaders, and for me. And I want to thank you for that. Praying plugs us into God's mighty power and it is God's mighty power that makes the work and love of the church possible.

Paul writes, ". . . may you know . . . his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength . . ."

When Charla was recovering from her car accident, there was a time when she was in denial about what had happened to her. She had been in the hospital for some time and she needed to be working hard on her rehab. But the whole thing seemed somehow unreal to her. Why put forth all that effort when this wasn't really happening? She was going to wake up out of this nightmare anytime.

Charla tells this better than I do, but at one point she heard God saying to her. You are going to get better. You have too many people praying for you not to. So you need to get to work on it. She took that to heart and started really working on her rehab from that day on.

I thought about that this week as I was working on this sermon. Sometimes the words for a sermon come easily for me. Sometimes they flow faster than I can write them down. Other times, nothing seems to come. I go to the well for words and the bucket comes up empty. And I pray for God's help that he will send me the words, and still the bucket comes up empty. And the thought crosses my mind, is this the Sunday that I stand up and have absolutely nothing worthwhile to say?

It is a panicky kind of feeling. And I was feeling a bit of it this week. Then God reminded me of how many people I have praying for me. God reminded me of you. And then I had an image of water seeping into a dry well, seeping in from a hundred small cracks, seeping in from a hundred faithful prayers. And suddenly I had something to say again. Thank you for your prayers!

Paul goes on to give thanks for the greatest gift of all, for the sure and certain hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. Paul writes, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that

you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

We are reminded that in Christ, God defeated the very power of death. There is nothing that this world can throw at us that can stand in the way of God’s power. That is the hope to which God has called us.

We face many challenges in our lives and in our work for God. There are always things standing in our way. There are some listening today who are fighting Covid-19, unemployment, loss of a loved one, sickness and natural disasters. Though we must endure these things, they shall not have the last word. Those things that seem as powerful as the Giant Goliath, they shall not conquer chosen ones. Those obstacles before us that seem as immovable as mountains, they cannot block the path of Lord.

So we set our hope in the Lord, for God cannot be defeated.

This week of Thanksgiving, I bid you remember to give thanks for all your many blessings and among them these great blessings. Be thankful for a faith that results in the love not only of God but also of people. Be thankful of the prayers of the faithful that tap us into the mighty power of God. Be thankful for the sure and certain hope to which you have been called in Christ Jesus. For nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.