



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Gratitude

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, September 13, 2020

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.' You may recognize that passage from Romans as part of the opening anthem of the Burial office. Those words put our lives and our deaths in perspective. Something much larger is happening than just **my** life or **my** death. Both our lives and our deaths are part of God's never-ending stream of love, hope, and constant renewal of all creation. In fact, our lives and our deaths are not even ours.

The apostle Paul arrived at that point after seeking to settle some disputes among the Roman Christian community. There seemed to be some polar opposites in the church:

Weak versus Strong Christians.

Vegetarians versus Carnivores.

Those who recognize certain holy days versus those who don't.

Those who eat versus those who abstain.

Those who are insiders versus those who are outsiders.

The apostle Paul wanted these different groups not just to tolerate each other, but to welcome each other with hospitality and open arms. He wanted them to see themselves as one unified body. And to do that, he brings up the ultimate of polar opposites - Alive versus Dead – and he contends that, in the eyes of God, these two are one as well.

Yesterday, the Baguette Brothers men's Bible study group held a retreat at Hal Crenshaw's pecan orchard in Como, Mississippi. We talked about the concept of legacy and what our legacies might be or what we might want them to be after we've died. There was actually something life-giving about our discussion. We began to see legacy not as a concrete noun, but as an active verb – as a living contribution to God's never-ending stream. We began to see legacy as something handed down through relationships from our ancestors and their friends, through us, and on to our friends and future generations. And, we began to move away from the concept of **my** legacy to **our** legacy, acknowledging too that we're all part of something much larger than ourselves.

At the end of our conversation, we didn't feel morbid, we felt hopeful. Death didn't seem quite as scary. And life seems to have more possibilities. We talked about what one word might describe the legacy that we may want to leave behind. One person said gratitude.

That's what the apostle Paul was hoping the Roman Christians would see as their legacy too. He wrote: 'Those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.' Either way, we give thanks to God. And we offer that together, as one people. Gratitude is the way we see beyond ourselves. We acknowledge that someone else, often God, has given us something we could not do or make for ourselves.

Gratitude, like legacy, is not a concrete noun. At its best, it too is an active verb. It is a gift to be paid forward, especially to the young and the most vulnerable among us. But gratitude is more than action, it is a way of life.

Diana Butler-Bass wrote in her book *Grateful*, "All around us, every day, there are gifts. Whether we are facing a crisis or not, no matter our challenges or feelings, there are gifts, most of which go unnoticed, unappreciated, and often disregarded. Sometimes they take us by surprise – we experience the 'aha' of being helped or seeing a beautiful sunset, and the emotion of gratitude wells up in our being. Gifts seem to spring upon us like an epiphany, bursting our hearts with that wild admixture of humility and joy we know as gratitude. But if we cultivate our awareness to see those gifts more often, with clearer and more consistent vision, something else happens. Thankfulness becomes more habitual, a regular part of how we respond to the world. Yes, gratitude still holds the power to surprise and to elicit a strong emotional response. However, as a habit, it also becomes a steadying companion, incorporated into the story of our lives. Gratitude is not just a knock-your-socks-off revelation of goodness and beauty; it emerges as a daily – even hourly – disposition of appreciation toward familiar gifts, including the tailwinds of blessing."

We acknowledge our lives as gifts from God, and we desire to live them as if they were prayers. Former President Dwight Eisenhower went back to Normandy in 1963 for the first time since World War II around the 20th anniversary of D-Day, the date of the Allied invasion to liberate France. As he was walking among the gravesites of the troops, to whom he gave the order to risk their lives, news anchor Walter Cronkite asked Ike what he felt toward these men. Eisenhower's voice choked up and he said, 'They gave us a second chance.'

I think that's what the apostle Paul is telling the Romans that God is giving them.

A second chance to move from division to unity.

A second chance to move from hostility to hospitality.

A second chance to move from intolerance to compassion.

A second chance to move from preoccupation with life and death to being part of the never-ending stream.

A second chance to be the body of Christ on earth and heaven.

A second chance to be a little part of God's legacy.

We're given those same second chances.

The questions for us are:

Will the gift of a second chance cause us to live differently?

How will we live more intentionally in paying our gratitude forward?

Will we extend grace and show mercy?

Will we receive grace and accept mercy?
Will we live the way of gratitude?
Will we live to the Lord and die to the Lord?
And then, what will be our legacy? *Amen.*