“More Than Meets the Eye: Accepting the Gift”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

2 Corinthians 6:1-13
As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Were you listening carefully to the passage Mike just read? Paul’s letter to the early church in Corinth includes a long list that spells out all the things he, his co-workers, and that community of faith were enduring: “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger…” Sounds like it could be pulled out of the headlines of our news these days. Skies filled with smoke and ash, evacuation warnings and orders, the sun’s light an eerie orangey-red, labors, sleepless nights, hunger…

Dr. Steve Thorsett, President of Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, where our Claremont School of Theology is now embedded, described the situation on campus this week and wrote: “things feel a bit apocalyptic”—citing COVID, the fires, ugly hatred in a demonstration at the Oregon State capitol just across the street from campus akin to those in Portland. Almost apocalyptic.

Don’t we find that the stories and letters from our sacred book, this Holy Scripture, never shy away from real life with all of its dangers and challenges? Instead, it assumes what we described earlier in this series—a kind of defiant faith. A faith that says: OK. I’m aware. My eyes are open. I see it all. It breaks my heart sometimes and frightens me. And yet….and yet…I stand firm. I choose, again and again, to walk by faith and not by sight.

This is the fourth and final sermon in our series “More Than Meets the Eye” based in 2 Corinthians. Some of you have commented that you find Paul’s writing to be a bit obscure, sometimes difficult to follow. And that it can be, but there’s so much there for us, especially in times such as these in which we live. Faith in the midst of tremendous challenges and adversity. An insistence on relying on God, on the gift of God’s grace, a power strong enough to match this and every moment.

It is that gift, that grace, that we seek in precious moments of worship, prayer, and reflection each day in our own prayer lives and each week in worship together.

We seek it for ourselves, as a balm to our own hearts and minds and souls, and we seek it for the saving mission and purpose of the church itself. Gil Rendle, a church consultant who has helped guide many of us through these past years in the life of the church puts it this way: “The purpose of the church is to change people’s lives through an encounter with the truth of Christ, an awareness of the immanent incarnation of God and a sense of grace that sustains life.”

A sense of grace that sustains life. It comes to us through the words of Scripture. It comes to us in the quiet of prayer. It comes to us in the smile and the steadfastness of one who has lived by faith their whole life long. It comes to us in the sacraments. It comes to us in music.

This morning we honor and give thanks to Dr. Jim Smith for his 55 years as our Director of Music. We know how music touches hearts and changes lives, inviting us all into the presence of God, creating moments when we feel
ourselves caught up in the love and grace of God. And who could have known that in 2020 we’d be asking him to make the kinds of adaptations to our music program that have continued seamlessly to give us the gift of gorgeous music for our worship services and Wednesday Noon Recitals?

Five years ago, when we celebrated Jim’s 50th, we were able to hold a wonderful luncheon in Simkins Hall to celebrate with Jim and Barbara. Though we’re not able to dine together today, I want to encourage you to reach out to them and send them your thanks and best wishes.

In a few minutes, Barbara will sing the Offertory for this morning’s service. The words, based on Psalm 27, express the confident, defiant, resilient faith of which Paul speaks:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom, then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom then shall I be afraid? Though a host of men were laid against me, yet shall not my heart be afraid; And tho’ there rose up war against me, yet will I put my trust in Him. For in the time of trouble, He shall hide me in His tabernacle. Yea, in the secret places of His dwelling shall He hide me, And set me up upon a rock of stone."

Thank you, Barbara, and Jim. And on we’ll go into the weeks and months ahead. I know enough to not ask “what else can possibly happen?”—because, it will! But we’re ready. As the social commentator, Margaret Wheatley, has pointed out: “It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be.” Paul’s words show us that we prepare for the future through the quality and depth of our lives in the present. We can’t even understand all that’s happening right now, can we, let alone all that the future might bring?

And yet, we walk by faith and not by sight. “We see clearly only with the heart,” as the Little Prince put it in the wonderful book by that title that speaks to children of all ages. “We see clearly only with the heart.”

Through the grace of God, we know that we abide in God’s dwelling place. Through grace, we know that God is the strength of our lives. Through grace, we know that God is with us through all times of trouble and tribulation. And so we can do as Paul asks Christ’s faithful disciples in the last verse of this morning’s passage: “open wide your hearts.” Open wide your hearts and receive the gift—that sense of grace that sustains life and changes lives.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.


Dr. Stephen E. Thorsett, “Words from Waller.” Sept. 8, 2020
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