

Guy Talk: Giving Thanks for Little Things

Ephesians 1:15-23

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

November 23, 2008

I.

This year it has finally sunk into my thick head that it would be better not to plan anything on the same weekend as our church's annual Women's Retreat. Not all of our women are away, but a significant number of them are. For this reason, there is no choir today, no handbell choir, no Associate Minister. We men have been left behind, and we are grateful to the women in the sanctuary today who have agreed to look after us. Given the absence of many of our mothers and sisters and children and wives, I thought I might engage you in a little "guy talk." Women who are with us, while I do not address this message specifically to you, I appreciate your presence. Very often, the women in men's lives are the ones who keep us honest.

When we read the Bible, we are pondering a collection of writings which could be characterized as an extended conversation among guys. For the most part, the Bible was compiled and written by guys for guys. It is, therefore, a wonder that women in countless times and places have found meaning in these pages. It is particularly amazing when women can find meaning in writings such as those by Paul and those attributed to Paul, such as the Letter to the Ephesians which we consider today. Pauline scholars widely agree that the Letter to the Ephesians was not written by Paul, but by a member of a Pauline church who ascribed the letter to Paul. The passage we read today is a prayer at the outset of the letter. It is a prayer that begins with thanksgiving: "I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

In the middle, we find prayers of intercession: "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."

Finally, the prayer closes with a crescendoing doxology of praise: "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, 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. Just in case you don't yet get the point, the prayer continues: "And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."
Amen. Amen. Amen.

II.

I don't know about you, but I tend to glaze over when I read or hear read passages such as this. These words don't seem to describe concrete, everyday realities. When I hear this prayer ascribed to Paul, I can't think of one practical thing I would do with it. I hear it, then wonder, "Okay, so what?" At the risk of generalizing, I think that men in our culture are obsessed with practical solutions. As those who have been, traditionally, household providers, we feel valued and valuable when we are

able to fix something. This applies as much to relationships as it does to squeaky doors.

Is this scene familiar to you? A woman in your life is telling you about a difficulty she is having, either with you or with someone else, or about a struggle in her personal life. Wanting to help, you start offering suggestions. Maybe you could try...? Why don't you just...? You know what I'd do...? At some point, you realize she is staring at you. While you were trying to be helpful, she looks at you as if at an enemy. "I don't need you to try to fix it," she says, "I just need you to listen to me."

Years ago, you might have been offended. "Fine, if you don't want my help." Later, you might have figured out how to just sit there and listen, biting your tongue, looking like a deer in headlights, but knowing better than to offer advice. Now, you might be starting to realize that she is trying to teach you a truth about life. Not everything is a problem to be solved. Not everything can be understood in practical terms. I'm not calling women impractical. I'm saying that not everything can be solved with an easy fix. Some things are mostly emotion, and the only way to "solve" an emotion is to feel it. Some things are mostly story, and the only way to "solve" a story is to hear it and find your place in it. Some things are mostly prayer, and the only way to pray a prayer is to give yourself to it.

III.

When I asked for 5 weeks of family leave at the end of August and most of September, my reason was largely practical. Brooke and I would need the time to "figure out" the new addition to our family. We would need to figure out who was sleeping where. We would need to figure out who was responsible for whom and when and how often. Who would help the 3 year old use the potty and who would change the baby's diaper? Who would make dinner? We knew that mommy would feed the baby, but when did daddy step in to take care of baby? With the help of grandparents who cooked for and doted upon us for several weeks, we established new rhythms and routines for our life with the new addition. My need for practical solutions became, to a large extent, fulfilled. But I also received a fulfillment I did not ask for and did not expect.

Without having to rush to be at work, my days were more leisurely and spacious. Because mom was holding the newborn, I would take the guys - 3 year old Marin and 5 year old Kermit the wiener dog - on walks. I had picked up a collection of writings by another guy, Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who used his writings to share contemplative insights with everyday folks like you and me and to protest social injustices like the Vietnam War and racial inequalities. My goal was to wake before the rest of the household - usually about 5:30 - and have "my time" drinking coffee, reading, and thinking. While this happened sometimes, often (too often), I would hear the voice of my 3 year old, like a restless rooster, calling from his bed in the morning's twilight: "Daddy!"

"Ugh!," I thought, sometimes uttering words I wouldn't dare utter in a sermon. I would go upstairs to his room, insist crankily that he get dressed, plunk him into the stroller, harness up the wiener dog in his choker collar and retractable leash, then go on a begrudging walk, lamenting that I was robbed of "my time" for contemplation

and reflection. One morning, as this scenario played out, I grabbed my Merton book, threw it in the hood of the stroller, and pushed the stroller grumpily out the door. When we got to the top of the hill, to Shook's Run, I stopped the stroller, took out the book, and said, "Marin, we're going to do our first reading."

"Okay, dada," he replied.

Not believing his acquiescence would last long, I began to read. Marin did not interrupt once, but just sat, eating grapes, taking in the morning. When I finished, he asked, "You done, dada?"

"Yes," I said, "thanks for being patient."

"What you reading about?"

"I was reading something by a guy who writes about God."

"Who is God?"

"God is the one who created everything and loves everyone very much."

"Does God love me, dada?"

"Yes, Marin, God does."

"Does God love you?"

"Yes, I think God loves me very much."

"Does God love Kermit?"

"I think so."

I tell you, for two weeks, everyday I brought that book on our walks. Every day, I read 1 or 2 selections from it. Not once did Marin interrupt, and often he and I would talk about God, about the morning, the crows, the squirrels, the pink mountain, the moon. The one I thought was a distraction became my companion and teacher. Through his eager eyes and curiosity, I came to appreciate that spirituality is not about proudly carving out time to read and reflect. It is about seeking God in every moment, especially in the moments that are expressly non-spiritual - the commute, the grocery trip, returning phone calls, making dinner, cleaning up.

I don't mean to suggest that my relationship with my son is a constant blissful union of souls communing in God. It's not. Far from it. In fact, two nights ago, when I was leaving the house to go to a meeting for the fourth night in a row, I asked him for a kiss goodbye. He came over with his lips puckered, then, at the last second, head butted me in the nose.

We both have needs and get cranky when the other isn't on board. But thank God he *has* needs and is learning, day by day, how to get those needs met and how to let go of needs that can't be met. Who isn't still learning this? The spiritual life is a process of constantly reminding yourself that treasure lies deep below the surface of your life.

Last week, Brooke and I went grocery shopping with Marin and Sophia. Transitions into car seats, then out of the car into the shopping cart were, well, less than smooth. In the produce department, near the potatoes, an employee asked, "You folks need help finding anything?"

"No," I joked, "but would you mind taking our kids for the next half hour."

The man, maybe in his fifties, smiled calmly, put down the onions he was stacking, and said, "Time goes by so quickly. You know, my son just turned 19. Graduated high

school last May. I would give anything to relive some of these moments,” he said, pointing to our family, “Enjoy them.”

After that, I felt less stressed, less exhausted, and more tender toward my roving and grabbing toddler, more appreciative of my fussing and drooling infant. It’s amazing how a moment of gratitude can change the way you see the world.

IV.

Paul’s prayer at the outset of Ephesians begins with thanksgiving. He’s grateful for the people in his life. These relationships make his life worth living. From thanksgiving, his prayer moves to hoping the best for those whom he loves. In essence, he prays,

“I want for you a light and enlightened heart. I want for you to believe in hope and possibility. I want for you to have a sense of the richness of life. I want for you to be blown away by the immeasurable greatness of God’s power, which manifests itself in the most common moments.”

Finally, Paul’s prayer moves to doxology, that is, praise which stammers at the edge of language to describe God’s greatness.

This is great guy talk, and yet it is guy talk that revels in this:

Instead of always trying to solve big problems, we might spend some time giving thanks for little things. When we hear and see and accept our loved ones for who they are, without trying to fix their problems, they might surprise us with their ability to teach us that sustained attention leads to fruitful intimacy. We won’t be able to contain our prayers for their well-being. And we’ll end up with hearts full of thanksgiving and praise for the one whose name is above every name, the one who fills all in all, and yet whose body is the church, the epitome of community, the container of relationships beautiful and broken, whom Christ calls to love the world until the end of time. Amen.