

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“More than You Desire or Deserve” (Philippians 3:4b-9)
October 4, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The older I get the more I appreciate one of the hallmarks of Anglicanism: the collect, the brief theologically loaded prayer we pray near the beginning of every service of Holy Eucharist. The collect for today is one of the most beautiful and powerful in the entire *Book of Common Prayer*, saturated with high octane gospel:

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior (*BCP* 234).

This collect describes God as “Almighty and everlasting”, reminding us God is all-powerful and eternal, which in and of itself is good news because you and I are weak and mortal. But more than that, this collect shows us that God’s stance toward us is always a stance of grace, that God is indeed “always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve.”

What are you praying for today? Or what is on your mind or heart that it’d probably be good for you to pray about but you haven’t gotten around to it yet? God already cares more about you and that need than you do, and right now God is more ready to hear about it than you are to pray about it. Not only that, God is also ready to give you not just what you think you’ve earned but more, much more than you could ever desire or deserve. That is the gospel. God’s grace is always “more than” grace—God is already “more than” ready to give you “more than” you either desire or deserve. That is because God is a gracious God, who gives grace that supersedes and transcends and overshadows anything you think you deserve.

In his book about the collects in *The Book of Common Prayer* Paul Zahl comments about this aspect of the collect:

God wills to give us more than we want and certainly more than we deserve. Can we for one second comprehend this! God does not work on the principle of distributive justice—i.e. “we get what we deserve.” On the one hand, He wants to do more for us, in our impoverished frangibility, than we can conceive. On the other hand, He wants to do good to us rather than judge us according to our deserving. If He gave us what we deserve, who could stand? (*The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* 93).

Because God is a gracious God who gives you more than you desire or deserve, when it comes to the grace of God, you can leave your resume at the door.

This is what the Apostle Paul writes about in today’s passage from his Letter to the Philippians, as he contrasts his resume based on the Old Testament law with the actual grace of God he experienced in Jesus Christ:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3:4b-6).

Paul had a stellar resume. As a Pharisee, he knew the Old Testament scriptures backwards and forwards, inside out. When it came to Judaism, Paul’s pedigree was impeccable. Paul was “circumcised on the eighth day” according to the Old Testament law (Leviticus 12:3). Paul was a full blooded Israelite, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews” from the tribe of Benjamin, who as you may remember was one of Jacob’s favorite sons because his mother was Rachel, his favorite wife. The tribe of Benjamin also took pride in the fact that the very first king of Israel, King Saul, after whom Paul was originally named, was from that same tribe.

And just like the catchphrase in every infomercial you have ever seen on television, “But wait, there’s more!” As a Pharisee, Paul not only knew the Old Testament law, he kept it, to the letter—“as to righteousness under the law, blameless”—and was so zealous about the Old Testament law that he persecuted Christians. Why? Because the gospel of God’s love in Jesus Christ is not about the law and your getting what you deserve; the gospel is about grace and God giving you more than you desire or deserve.

Paul experienced the actual grace of God in Jesus Christ, grace from God who had always been more ready to hear him than he had been to pray, grace from God who had always given him more than he desired or deserved. During the 135 mile journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, Paul encountered the risen Jesus (Acts 9:1-19), who forgave him for persecuting the church and commissioned him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul later wrote to his primary protégé, Timothy: “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:13-14). When Paul finally experienced the reality of the “more than” grace of God in Jesus Christ, it changed everything.

In John’s account of the gospel there is an often overlooked episode during which Jesus is addressing Pharisees just like Paul had been, Pharisees who really new the scriptures but were missing the whole point. “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life,” Jesus said, “and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

That is what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, except that he had not come to Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ had come to Paul so that he could have life. And this encounter with the Risen Jesus, this overwhelming experience of God’s grace rendered Paul’s resume irrelevant, as Paul also wrote in today’s passage:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but the righteousness from God based on faith (Philippians 3:4b-9).

In other words, Paul personally experienced God answering the prayer we prayed in the collect today—God poured out on Paul the abundance of his mercy, God forgave Paul of those things of which his conscience was afraid, and God gave Paul “those good things for which (he was) not worthy to ask except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior.” And never again was Paul’s life and ministry based on his resume...but rather based on the grace of God.

Many years ago as I went through the process toward ordination I met with the diocesan commission on ministry, who peppered me with many questions. Initially I did well, and had no problem answering any of their questions, because I had years of ministry experience, years of theological training, years of reading and studying the scriptures—so what else was there to talk about?

But then someone asked me a question I was not expecting, a question that had nothing to do with my pedigree or education or resume, but instead a question that actually went right to the heart of the gospel. “Dave,” I was asked, “could you please describe a time you failed and experienced the grace of God?” Let me repeat that...“could you please describe a time you failed and experienced the grace of God?” How would you respond if I asked you that question today? (Don’t worry, I won’t ask you, but you already know). I honestly don’t remember which failure I told them about because, trust me, I had plenty to pick from, but that is the only question I remember being asked that day.

They were right. Experiencing the grace of God in the midst of your failures, just like happened with the Apostle Paul, and just liked what has happened (and still does) in my own life, is indeed where the gospel connects with your actual life, when you experience personally that God has always been more ready to hear than you have been to pray, and always wanted to give you more than you desire or deserve. And this renders your resume irrelevant and causes you to echo Paul, “whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss...I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

You see, the gospel has nothing to do with your resume or pedigree or anything else you may lean on to justify yourself—rather the gospel has everything to do with the overwhelming, all encompassing, “more than” grace from God.

And even now God is present—more ready to hear than you are to pray and more than willing to give you more than you desire or deserve.

Amen.