

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 28, 2008
 09.28 Means of Grace—Prayer

Philippians 2:1-13

Resource: *Claim the Name: Confirmation Teaching Plans for 6-15 Weeks*, 2006.

Dr. Tex Sample of St. Paul School of Theology is a champion of the religious experience of hard-working, “hard-living” folks. They tend to be his heroes—but they have their foibles, too. Some twenty-odd years ago Tex told a story in a class I had with him about a would-be “Good Samaritan” he once met. Just so you know, this is not one of his “hero” stories. As best I can remember (considering it’s been over twenty years since I heard him tell it), the story goes something like this:

It seems Tex wasn’t paying close attention to his gas gauge as he drove down the highway one day. (I’ve done that before. I know the embarrassment. I also know the sense of relief when someone stops.) Well, Tex was trying to figure out what he should do—thumb a ride? walk? was it closer to go back or to go forward? how far is the next town &/or gas station anyway?—when a young man on a motorcycle pulled up next to him.

The young man looked a bit rough-&-tumble with long hair, leather jacket, & covered in tattoos—just Tex’s kind of guy. He also had a Bible in his hand & as he approached Tex he asked, “Friend, can I tell you about Jesus?”

Tex replied, “I’d be glad to hear what you have to say about Jesus if you’d just give me a lift to the next town so I can get some gas.”

At that his would-be “*Good Samaritan*” answered, “Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

Say what!??? I can tell you about Jesus but I can’t help you out? This young man felt full of something in Jesus’ name, but could we truly call it faith? He was like a gas tank full of water—it may be full but it’s not going to get you anywhere. It needs to be poured out so it can be filled with something else.

Being poured out... that’s what I want to talk about this morning. But I want to begin with an object lesson to help us see what I would like for us to understand. I have with me this morning a small bottle of pomegranate juice & a glass. Now, as I open up the bottle & pour all of the juice into this glass, tell me..., is the bottle empty?

No, it is not. It is empty of *juice*, but it’s still every bit as full as it was before I poured the juice out. It’s full of something other than juice (in this case, air). Please note that until I began to pour the juice the air could not get in, but, as soon as the pouring started the air rushed in to take its place. Get the picture? With that in mind, let’s turn to what Paul has written to the church at Philippi.

Paul spent a good deal of his life being offended with Jesus Christ. He was a Pharisee among Pharisees, a Jew among Jews, observant in every manner of the law. He likely would have joined in the complaint of the Jewish leaders that Jesus, calling God “*Abba*” (i.e., “Daddy” or “Papa”), made himself far too familiar with the Almighty, so familiar as to count himself God’s equal. The offense was so deep that Paul (at that time still called Saul) would not only approve of the persecution & summary execution of Christians, he would embrace it.

But by the time he writes this letter things have changed. What has offended him most of his life has now become his best defense of the faith in general & of Jesus Christ in particular,

“...who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself & became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8, NRSV) In the theology of Paul, Jesus pours himself out, not that he might become empty, but that he might become full of something else. And with what would he be filled? With God. With us. With love, grace, mercy, hope & faith.

Paul knows this pouring out intimately. It’s what happened to him on the road to Damascus & continued to happen every day following that experience. He had to be poured out—daily emptying himself of himself & of most of what he had ever learned & valued as a Pharisee—before he could be filled with the Holy Spirit & with a love for the church, especially the Gentile church. Beyond that, he witnessed this pouring out through the ministrations of others, first of Ananias, then of all the disciples in Damascus & Jerusalem, & especially through the mentoring of Barnabas. Each of them had to empty themselves of their own fears—of everything they believed Paul/Saul to be—before they could make room for him in their hearts, in their lives, in their church. (cf. Acts 9:1-31)

Emptying that we might become full..., filled with the love of God & of Jesus Christ, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, filled with the love of Christ for one another & for all, filled with mercy & love, with hope, faith & grace... that’s what I want for us today. The primary means by which this grace grows & becomes real is prayer.

We’ve spent several weeks talking about the Wesleyan condition & rules for evangelical living. (To review:

One Condition: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins.”

Rule #1: “By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind.”

Rule #2: “By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all.”

Rule #3: “By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” (The Book of Discipline of TUMC, 2004, pg. 48)

Prayer is the central means by which we grow in the grace of God. Family & private prayer is an ordinance of God. If we practice it, grace & faith grow within us. If we neglect it, they fade. Why? Because prayer brings us into intentional conversation with God & is both life creating & life changing. Because it involves pouring ourselves out that we might be filled with something else... that we might be filled with the Spirit of God—which is the very breath of life..., that we might be filled with one another—which is to know & be filled with mercy, love & grace, both for God & for others.... And yes, I have to believe that even God requires & desires not only our love but our mercy & grace as well. God didn’t have to create this world. God didn’t have to allow freedom, & with it both evil & suffering beyond measure. (It may have been better than not creating & not allowing it but still....) I firmly believe that God yearns for our grace every bit as much as we yearn for God’s. Jesus’ sacrifice makes both possible.

Two forms of prayer are of particular importance: intercession & meditation. Intercessory prayer means praying for the needs of others. It’s hard to imagine growing in grace without it. Meditation involves a “listening to God in which we focus on something (e.g. scripture passage, word or phrase) & then see what images, feelings & thoughts come.” It requires silence & it “helps if we find a spot by ourselves, settle down, get comfortable, focus on our thoughts, & try to be open & receptive to what God might be saying to us.” Both require a willingness to be poured out that we might become filled with God & with one another.

What would I have us do this week? (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Pray. Just pour ourselves out & pray.