

**“WE GIVE THANKS FOR YOU”** (*Farewell for summer - reflection on 6 months*)

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

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Deuteronomy 30:9-14 and Psalm 25:1-10 • Colossians 1:1-14 • Luke 10:25-37 (Good Samaritan)

***“In our prayers for you we always thank God . . .”***

*–Col. 1:3a*

*To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Bordentown: Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. In my prayers for you I always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for I have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you.*

*Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.*

*This you learned from our forebears, faithful ministers of Christ on your behalf, and they have made known to me your love in the Spirit.*

*For this reason, since the day I heard it, I have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.*

*May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.*

*God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

That should sound familiar — it's an adaptation of today's reading from Colossians. Now let me take the liberty of moving to chapter 2 and adding verses 16-19, similarly adapted:

*Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and demanding of you visions and other signs. These are puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, rather than holding fast to Christ, the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a maturity that is from God.*

Paul's message to the Church at Colossae is much like the one I would write to you, in similar circumstances. Thank goodness, I'm not writing from prison!! Rather, I'm reflecting on six months with you, a time in which I have indeed observed the gospel “bearing good fruit” among you. And, as Paul therefore commended the Colossians, and told them to ignore messages of condemnation and diminishing of their faith and practice, I say the same to you.

Paul points to the sense of joy and hope among them, attributing it to Christ working within them. He assures them that they are already pulled out of the darkness and lodged securely in the Light of God, members and inheritors of the Saints in Light.

Now that's an odd phrase . . . saints in light. We Presbyterians have been taught that, in true New Testament

understanding, we are the saints . . . the believers . . . the faithful . . . here and now. Sometimes we forget that we are also surrounded by “so great a cloud of witnesses” – the saints from before and the saints who will follow. Those who worshiped in this room long ago, and those children who now learn in this room and will someday be our leaders. So being inheritors of the Saints in Light, we are joined to them — crossing the chasm between earth and heaven — and, as I have said many times before, in doing so, we are fulfilling one of the “Great Ends of the Church,” we are “an exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world”.<sup>1</sup> We witness to the larger community that we are bound together in Christ under a rule of love and justice.

So in what way are you producing good spiritual fruit?

One of the first ways is what Paul commends elsewhere and claims for himself in this passage — praying without ceasing. If prayer both connects us with God and with the saints of all time, and if it “holds the whole world together” as the earliest monks thought, then Roger Nishioka observes, “Little wonder then that prayer features so prominently in Paul’s letters to the early Christian communities. Prayer not only draws these fledgling communities closer to God; it is also what holds these fragile groups together.”<sup>2</sup>

Quoting Henri Nouwen, Nishioka goes on to say that one problem with prayer is that “many Christians view it largely as an intellectual exercise—an ‘activity of the mind’ that reduces prayer to simply speaking with God or thinking about God.” This definition, of course, objectifies God and may yield nothing more than “new intellectual discoveries about God.” Instead, Nouwen prefers to look at prayer as an activity of the heart — and reclaims the “Jewish understanding of heart as the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and volitional energies. . . . In this way, prayer does not limit our relationship with God to interesting words, right thoughts, interesting conversations . . . or pious emotions.”<sup>3</sup>

In this understanding, to pray without ceasing is to do what so many in this congregation do — to carry within a Christ-like compassion, and to pray in words, non-words, and actions. It’s not something to be delegated to our Prayer Chain alone. Prayer is everyone’s vocation. Take, for example, our Deacons. (Are there any here today?) Our Deacons don’t limit their “duties” to the time they’re listed as Deacon-on-call. And they pay more than lip-service . . . they visit without encouragement, enlarging the caring that I can provide in brief calls to the home or hospital.

And when any one develops a sense of ceaseless prayerfulness, they are changed. Then, as a faith community, they and we are drawn closer to God. This is because, as Nishioka puts it, “Prayer of the heart is the active presence of God’s Spirit at work in one’s life.”<sup>4</sup>

I believe that this is another of the six Great Ends of the Church . . . this one is “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.” Of course, that encompasses more than our prayer life — or prayerful living. That also includes our nurture of children, through a creative and dedicated church school and the willingness of individuals to take on “extended care” for our littlest ones. And not only children — we have three active adult groups who can be said to be in the nurturing business — studying scripture and reading and studying together from a Christian perspective. And this Great End also includes the work of the Congregational Life team, who seek to knit us together — that not one lamb will be lost for lack of searching, and that we have opportunities for fellowship and recreation to bind us together.

OK, this is getting exciting . . . I wonder if we can hit all 6 Great Ends?! Two down, four to go! We’ve done the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. Now, let’s see how this congregation’s fruitful living may be fulfilling the other four.

Let’s start with the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. Well, it’s been said,

“proclaim the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words!” In our words and actions, in our relationships with others, we proclaim that we follow in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace, the one who proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had already come near. We live and share the understanding that God is a God of love, forgiveness, and resurrection living. The fearful “E” word – Evangelism – is something we could probably work on. It’s very easy for all of us to rest on that “when necessary, use words” phrase and allow it to excuse us from voicing our faith when it is appropriate to do so. But I feel that the proclamation of the gospel is closely tied to the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

How about “the maintenance of divine worship?” Wow! This is an area where your spiritual gifts and your equipping for the building up of the church shine! There has not been a co-leader of any age that has not been prepared for their leadership role, biblically astute enough to locate their own passage in the Bible, and understand the flow of worship. Our Worship Team is diligent in planning by season and by Sunday for the best possible artistic and liturgical support of the scriptural message. And our musicians are equally sensitive to seasons and themes, and dedicated to excellence in their craft. We are truly blessed. So session — are you here? — the maintenance of worship is your responsibility — and you get high marks!

Now we come to one that may seem a bit nebulous . . . the preservation of the truth. In today’s post-modern atmosphere, the truth is not always easy to discern. But as a denomination, we do exercise care in this area. Our General Assembly just met and dealt with a potential new confession to be added to our Book of Confessions. That book is key to our being a confessional church, and it seeks to help interpret scripture for all time and for particular times. The Declaration of Barmen set forth learnings from World War II. The Confession of 1967 offered new perspectives on reconciliation in Christ, across traditional barriers of race and gender. The Brief Confession, until now our newest, gives greater emphasis to Jesus’ ministry and works of justice than our other shorter creeds which speak primarily of creation; of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and of the Spirit that enlivens the Church. In church school, worship, preaching, and in our governance, we seek to be faithful to core truths that we define and elaborate on in our Book of Confessions, while always being the Church Reformed and always being Reformed. (By the way, if that sounds familiar, it’s the motto of the Presbyterian Church - the Church Reformed and always being Reformed.

I’ve saved for last “the promotion of social righteousness.” This is indeed the congregation with the Need to Feed. It should be emblazoned on our sign out front! If I’ve figured it out correctly, we have 3 food ministries — Grocery Bags, Bread of Life Mission Meals, and Ready-to-Distribute Meals that I’m able to offer to folk who are hungry and stop by the office looking for help.

But even though we’re so good at this – and really, really good – I think it’s time we begin to branch out. The session has been considering connecting with a mission co-worker, what we used to call missionaries. These folk depend upon the churches for their daily bread, while they are ministering to medical, agricultural, educational, and of course, spiritual needs in the United States and around the globe. Do you know that we have folk in Afghanistan, Belarus, Haiti, Sudan, Kazakhstan . . . many, many people being the hands and feet of Christ. This is something we can think about as we build upon our strength in “the promotion of social righteousness.”

OK, those six Great Ends of the Church don’t include everything the congregation does. My summer newsletter article gets more detailed, but suffice it to say that your session and its committees work very hard to maintain and nurture our ministries, our facilities, and our staff. Over the summer, I hope you hard-workers will have the opportunity to take some sabbath time – that your days won’t be constantly filled with phone calls and emails about tasks not yet completed. It’s biblical, and it’s healthy — take a break! And next fall, when we gather, I’m hoping we can expand this hard-working core group. I want everyone who is

here to think prayerfully about some aspect of our church's ministry that you have felt a little tug toward, a still small voice urging you, or something new you've never considered before.

By continued and growing faithful living, in the presence of our community, we show that we are a group bound together by love of God and love of neighbor. Amen.

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## **ENDNOTES**

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1. The Great Ends of the Church, *Book of Order* G-1.0200: The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.
  2. Roger Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 232.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 234-6, quoting Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 71.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 236/