

First Sunday of Advent – Year B – November 27, 2011
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
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Today we continue to celebrate with thanksgiving as we welcome a new member of the Body of Christ, and usher in the first Sunday of Advent. Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, hits the nail on the head when he says, “Let us remember that, as much as been given us, much will be expected from us, and that true homage comes from the heart as well as from the lips, and shows itself in deeds.” Roosevelt echoes what Paul teaches in imitation of Christ. For this Thanksgiving weekend, we have a great thanksgiving letter from Paul full of lasting wisdom, as meaningful today as it was when it was written.

Paul’s letter will eventually unfold into an in-depth response addressing a number of challenging issues in the fledgling Christian community at Corinth. Perhaps the most important of Paul’s teaching tasks here is to help redirect the prideful boasting of a bunch of highly gifted, but relatively new Christians. Corinth is a busy port city with a diverse population and plenty of worldly temptations. I’m sure you’ve all noticed that the Christmas shopping stampede is well underway. I’m equally sure that many of us are already hurting financially, without the stress and pressure of the upcoming Christmas season. It’s hard to resist the temptation to get caught up in the madness all around us. We have a gift from God in this season of Advent. It’s a blessed oasis in a desert of consumerism, and it doesn’t cost a dime to spend time with God. Sadly, in stressful times, some people withdraw from the community of faith, perhaps because they’re just too busy. Some begin to believe that God has deserted them, without actually taking the time to be honest about the state of their spiritual lives. Still others are angry with God for all kinds of reasons. On the other hand, some of us continue to participate in religious activities, but go into a kind of personal overdrive trying to fix everything through our own knowledge or strength. It’s wonderfully refreshing to see Paul in action.

We can’t underestimate how deeply he feels for each of these communities of faith. He considers himself a kind of spiritual father to these children of God, and like any good parent, he wants the very best for his children. It’s true that Paul puts a lot of time and effort into nurturing the Corinthians in their faith, but this short opening passage gives us a clue as to where Paul’s energy and inspiration clearly come from. He mentions Jesus Christ no less than six times in these seven short introductory verses to his letter. Everything Paul is about to say is deeply rooted in the Lord Jesus. Where we might be relying on our own strength, anytime Paul is feeling stressed or frustrated, he turns immediately to Jesus. In all the circumstances of his life, Paul looks to Jesus. His single-minded focus equips him to offer the blessing of God in Christ, to share the grace and peace of God in Christ, and to give thanks to God in Christ Jesus.

Paul gently reminds us that all we have and all we are is a gift from God. What we do with our gifts in thanksgiving speaks volumes about the way our hearts are oriented. Paul’s first thought is to direct his thanksgiving and praise to God in Christ Jesus. As we’ve heard many times, that’s also the first response of all followers of Christ in gratitude for the many blessings we are each given. In fact, Paul considers giving thanks to God to be a spiritual discipline. Practicing our spiritual disciplines helps us to grow and experience spiritual transformation. Practice makes perfect, if you like. However, we’re talking about a lifetime journey of change that sets us apart, and equips us to love and serve God and our neighbors. Practicing an attitude of gratitude during the best of times, equips us to live out the truth and promise of Christ even during the most difficult times in our lives. Like Paul, we give thanks in all circumstances. Even when it’s hard to see a reason for giving thanks in the moment, we know and trust in the Lord to redeem all things for good. The same is true for other spiritual disciplines. We pray without ceasing, because sometimes God seems very distant to us. We study the Scriptures, so that we can experience God’s steadfast love, peace, and encouragement embodied in us as the living Word. We forgive others as God forgives us, because it helps to redirect our instinctive response to enact revenge. We confess our sins

against God and our neighbors, because we're rather too well rehearsed in the ways of the world that promotes self-righteousness denial, and a lack of accountability.

For the church at Corinth, Paul reminds them that they have been enriched in speech and knowledge of every kind *through their faith in Christ*, not because of their own merits. He tells them that by God's grace their faith has made them strong witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us all that our community has been blessed with an abundance of spiritual gifts that we're called to share to the glory of God's name. Paul is helping us to recall that our own abundant wealth and empowered lives are a blessing from God in and through Christ Jesus. The glory all belongs to God. We really have nothing to boast about in and of ourselves. That's why it's so important to give our thanks and praise to God in Christ Jesus. God's grace empowers our ministries. In turn, we're showing the world in word and deed what God's love and compassion really look like. Each community of faith is intended to be like a thanksgiving feast, spread out and commissioned to feed the malnourished, and spiritually starved people of the world, not just once a year, but every day.

Pastor and preacher, John Henry Jowett once wrote, "Gratitude is a vaccine, an antitoxin, and an antiseptic." A grateful heart is much more likely to be protected against common ailments like grumbling and complaining. This kind of dis-ease can grow unchecked in those who can't appreciate what they have been blessed with, but are instead stuck in self-centered thinking. Without offering thanks to God for all His good gifts, grumblers are convinced that they deserve more of everything, and complain constantly that they haven't got as much as their neighbors. Antitoxins work within our body to destroy harmful poisons of a biological origin. What kind of toxins do we carry around, or even actively cultivate? What about things like jealousy, greed, or gossip mongering? How about judgmentalism or many of the other -isms? The lifetime practice of thankful praise to God in Christ Jesus can remove these harmful and poisonous tendencies from our lives. Loving gratitude is part of the blessing of God's healing intimately associated with His gift of eternal life. As an antiseptic, a spirit of thanksgiving can comfort, soothe, and heal the wounds of living in a sin-sick world. What kind of things destroy our peace of mind, or our spiritual health and well-being in Christ? An unforgiving heart? A lack of compassion, or generosity? Fear or anger? As Paul says in his letter to the Philippians (4:8), we can remain free from dis-ease when we hold on to "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable..." Paul would certainly agree with Jowett that "life without thankfulness is devoid of love and passion."

Christianity is a unique religion. God calls us into a loving and intimate relationship through Christ Jesus. Christianity is essentially expressed in community as we become members, one of another, in Christ's Body. Advent presages a time of anticipation and preparation. According to Paul, our mission is to continue sharing the Good News faithfully in the knowledge and power of God's steadfast love, as we grow into all the characteristics of Christ-likeness. You and I fulfill God's expectations of us through our praise and thanksgiving, through living faithfully, and through loving others as Christ loves us. Being a disciple of Jesus makes us different. Our faith in Him sets us apart from the world, so that we can show others that there is a life-giving alternative to buying into cultural hype. Our faith in the Lord sets us apart to share the fullness of Christ's love and peace. Our faith in Jesus equips us to reveal the depths of joy that only Christ can give, and that no other gift can ever fulfill. Our faith in Christ helps us to see as He sees, and to value what He values. In and through Christ, we are nurtured and prepared for our journey of faith. Advent helps us to prepare the cradle of our hearts to receive again the Lord of all. By accepting this gift of God's grace, we are deepening our fellowship with Him, and with one another.

Amen.