

Of This Gospel

Isaiah 60:4-6; Ephesians 3:7-12
Epiphany Sunday; January 8, 2023
Brian Russo

“In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich. It is very easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements in comparison with what we owe others.” – Letters and Papers from Prison (1943-45)

This quote comes from a Cindy favorite... three guesses who... Yes, it was old Dietrich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote this beautiful commentary on gratitude and humility, doing so from a prison cell in Germany. From a jail where he awaited certain death for being in on the plot to kill Hitler. And there, facing the big questions of theology and life, and his own mortality, Bonhoeffer writes how it's only with gratitude that life becomes rich. Doesn't that just impress you and take your breath away, that he was able to write that from where he was? It's only with gratitude that life becomes rich. And yet how right he was and is.

Miroslav Volf, when speaking of Bonhoeffer's letters, remarks that they are “the most celebrated case of ‘engaged theology.’” Engaged theology; that is, when Christian faith is “a way of living in the here and now, in both its great historical upheavals and its little personal joys and sufferings.” My friends, that's where faith is engaged! In great history and little joys and sufferings. Don't forget that. For even though what comes out of this pulpit is important, and what rings down from that balcony is inspirational, it's what happens in the days of our lives, shared together, where faith really works, and reaches into our hearts. Doing something truly special, something that will last. For 15-years perhaps, or maybe even a great deal more than that.

Thomas Merton, the great Catholic thinker and monk writes: “To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything given us. Every breath we draw is a gift of God's love, every moment of existence is a grace.” If that is true, and if Bonhoeffer is right -- that it's only with gratitude that life becomes rich -- then today I am like George Bailey at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*, when he is declared the richest man in town. For my gratitude to God for you is overflowing, as I have received a great deal more than I ever gave, even though I was the **least** bit worthy.

It's true... Even though he may not have written it, Paul says to the Ephesians, “**Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God... and although I am the very least of all, this grace was given to me**” To me. You ever have a moment on Sunday when you feel some part of scripture was written just for you? That's how I feel when reading this passage. For sometimes I still can't believe that I have been in ministry this long, or even, that I got into it at all.

You see, when I was at Princeton, in Seminary, I had no idea where I was or what I was doing. I had never heard of Karl Barth and no doubt mispronounced his name once or twice. I had heard of Calvin but couldn't tell you what TULIP stood for. I had more questions than answers, and probably more doubts than questions. Someone in Systematic Theology unfairly nicknamed me “Atheist Brian” because I seemed too unsure of everything others claimed to know about God.

I've told this story before, but before I came to PCCH, I was convinced I was going to leave the Seminary. I remember googling graduate programs back at Seton Hall for Speech Pathology; I remember calling home and saying to my mom I made a mistake enrolling. But then, while lying there in bed, during what felt like one of the longest nights ever, a star shined, and led me I think to Stacy Johnson in the morning, and after him Debbie Davis the next day, and through her Cindy Jarvis the next month, and after Cindy, well, all of you for the last decade+.

You see, I really was the least of all M.Div. students ready for this call. I delayed it and questioned it, and even took another 8-years after starting here to get ordained; and yet here I am today, after all these years, because God is mysterious and good!

In rich variety, I have seen Divinity wrapped up in all of our memories, the big and the small. From parents and theology and pretzels on tap; to mornings with Bill and Ken and Clarke out at Habitat; to Dolores and the Circle at the Pinnacle; and Hap, Sue, and Barbara studying the Bible; with Jean and Troy on the phone; and Sally and Jesse at dinners alone; with Miller and Tommy and Zack at the bar; and in my car on the way to the Hill and out to the Farms. At every funeral, in every baptism, at every celebration of marriage and confirmation; I have found the manifestation of the incarnate God here in Chestnut Hill; and my friends, I have been so richly blessed, and I am so deeply grateful. I truly am.

Bonhoeffer reminds us that "it is very easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements in comparison with what we owe others." And the truth is, I owe you all so much, because truly you helped me see the plan for me and my life in the **mystery hidden for ages in God**. That **of this gospel** I have been called; yes even me, for God considers not just the best of us, but also the least. And that is such great, great news. For it means that as it was for me, God is also at work out there and in all of you. No matter who you are or where you are, God is creating something and working in you. You might feel like you are the last one that has anything to offer, but that's okay, for remember, even in Jonah, a prophet who literally ran away from his call into the belly of a whale, amazing and profound things can happen still.

You see, in scripture, we are given a blueprint of God's wonderful and weird ways. One might think that the Kingdom only has invitations out for saints and purists; but that's just not how it works. For it's in surprising ways, and in surprising places and people, that the Spirit moves and is made known.

In God electing Abram; and choosing David over of his brothers; in blessing Hagar in the wilderness; and giving Sarah a child; in calling forth the young boy, Samuel; and rebranding Saul as Paul; in Jesus naming simple fishermen and artisans as his own; and then defending centurions, tax-collectors; and harlots as worthy of the faith and of the Heavenly throne. Truly anything and anyone is possible with this God; and it's often in the strangest and most peculiar of characters where we find the Spirit abiding and working and commissioning.

The Magi, who we acknowledge and celebrate on this Epiphany Sunday, are kings who come bearing gifts, humbling themselves before another. But the King who they kneel before is not anything that the world could have expected.

For this King, the Christ-child, was found wrapped not in the finest linens nor in the inner chamber of some royal palace; but in some tattered cloth out somewhere in a rugged barn, cradled in the arms of a poor refugee couple, who had a strange story of being engaged, but without relations, overcome by an angel.

It is here, in this surprising scene and story, that the Magi are greeted by Divinity. Housed yet in ordinary flesh. And in gratitude, they realize they are receiving a great deal more than the gifts they had brought; and thus leave richer than how they first came.

And thus leave richer than how I first came.

Isaiah writes in our text today: **“Lift up your eyes and look around... you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you.”**

I feel this morning as I have felt for some time: that an abundance of a great sea has been brought to me. That when I lift my eyes and look around and see all of you today here before me, and in the photos and the videos and the painted memories on the walls and online, my heart is thrilled and overjoyed, and I am radiant.

In Ghost Ranch; in Belize; in Detroit; in the Youth Room; Widener Hall; and in this beautiful Sanctuary; abundance has been everywhere, and grace has visited upon me generously. And I am grateful. And I am so grateful.

...

In closing...everyone by now knows that Radiohead is my favorite band; but really, it was the artist and song-writer Björk who first transformed my musical tastes. At the conclusion of her best album, *Homogenic*, is one of her best songs (though the video-version is better), “All Is Full of Love.” In it she sings,

You'll be given love
You'll be taken care of
You'll be given love
You have to trust it
Maybe not from the sources you have poured yours
Maybe not from the directions you are staring at
Trust your head around
It's all around you
All is full of love
All around you

My friends, my family... thank you for all the wonder, for all the surprises, for all of the gifts you have given to me and to each other. We are all so richly blessed, and I am so thankful. For it all. All is full of love, always, forever. Amen.