

Romans 1:8-15 (NRSV)

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—¹²or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Colossians 3:12-16 (NRSV)

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Regardless of the circumstances of our lives this Thanksgiving, we ought to all find it easy to be grateful for the people of grace that make up St. Andrew.

It is easy for me to come to Thanksgiving with a grateful heart. I know well how blessed I am to have Patti, my sons, and my family. I will, by God's grace, soon be a grandfather for the first time. I love my work and am showered with appreciation from so many people at St. Andrew. I've got a great boss. I enjoy and respect my co-workers. Patti and I have a beautiful home and money in the bank. We're healthy. . . . See, it is easy for me to come up with a long list.

Of course, this hasn't always been the case in my life. I've been through divorce, job loss, and assorted other problems. Some years, Thanksgiving had a pretty hollow ring to it. And I know that every year there are people in our congregation for whom gratitude will not come easily. For them, there has simply been too much loss and pain.

But whether gratitude comes easily to us this Thanksgiving or with difficulty, we can all take the time to be grateful for the people who make up the fellowship of grace we call St. Andrew.

People of grace

Grace is one of those words that we toss around a lot, often without thinking about what is really meant. I like the old-fashioned definition of grace: "unmerited favor." If you deserve it, it isn't grace. Well-deserved rewards maybe, but not grace. Grace means a gift that we have no right to expect . . . none.

I was reminded of this when Patti and I went to see *Lars and the Real Girl*, starring Ryan Gosling. I'm not giving the movie away (at least no more than the reviews I read before going to see the movie) by telling you that Lars is a troubled and socially alienated young man who finally gets a girlfriend by ordering a life-like, life-sized doll. For Lars, this doll is very much real and he begins to build an elaborate delusion around it/her. As the community learns of Lars' delusion, they might be expected to respond with ridicule. Poor Lars does seem completely nutty. But they don't, believing that the way to help Lars is to go along with his delusion. Instead of ridicule, they respond with grace. Participating in Lars' delusion is their gift to him; he is the recipient of their unmerited favor. And this grace takes them all to a very surprising place.

As Patti and I watched the movie, we both thought to ourselves, “Wow, what friends . . . shouldn’t we all have friends like that! Such caring, grace-giving people.” And we knew that we do have such friends. Here, in this community, there are countless people who would extend to us and to one another the same love and grace that Lars’ friends extended to him.

“the gospel of his Son” (Rom. 1:9)

In his letter to them, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that he is serving God by “announcing the gospel of his Son.” What is this “gospel?” The answer may be a bit surprising to you.

Though the writings attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called gospels, that is not what Paul has in mind. The “gospel of his Son” is not a summary of Jesus’ teachings nor even of his ministry. The gospel is not the good news *of* Jesus, it is the good news *about* Jesus.

The underlying Greek word for “gospel” is *evangelion*. It is variously translated in the Bible as gospel/good news/glad tidings. From it, we get our English word “evangelism,” which is grounded in proclaiming the truth *about* Jesus.

In the Roman world of the first century, *evangelion* was not a church word, but was used to connote a proclamation of unusual importance, such as a great military victory, the birth of a son to Caesar, of a new Caesar taking the throne. Here is an inscription from 9BC about Augustus Caesar that illustrates my point:

“Caesar [Augustus] through his appearance has exceeded the hope of all former good news [*evangelia*] surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good news [*evangelia*].”

One could substitute “Jesus” for “Caesar” and it would sound familiar!

Paul brings to the Romans and all the world a proclamation, announcing that in Jesus, God has redeemed all humanity and creation from bondage to sin and death. And that though it may seem to all the world that Caesar, ruler of the vast Roman Empire, is the lord of all, in truth, it is Jesus who is Lord. The announcement of the gospel of God’s Son necessarily sets up a confrontation between God and the powers of this world, a confrontation that God has already won by virtue of Jesus’ faithfulness all the way to death on Caesar’s cross.

Rome, Colossae, Thessalonica

Of course, people of grace is what we ought to find at St. Andrew and every other community that calls itself Christian. We are recipients of God’s grace and we are called to be givers of grace. Indeed, we are not simply urged or even commanded to be people of grace. Such grace-giving is simply part of who we are as Christians, new selves reborn into the body of Christ (see the page three textbox).

Paul is thankful for these people. Though he knows some of the Christians who have now returned to Rome, he doesn’t know most of the community. But he is thankful for them. He knows that when he finally comes to Rome, he will be encouraged by their faith, as I’m sure he was despite the circumstances of his arrival.¹

Likewise, Paul is thankful for the Christians in Colossae²: “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.” In today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he in turn urges them to be thankful, living out the new selves that they are in Christ.

Paul is thankful for the Christians in Thessalonica: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thess. 1:2).

He is similarly thankful for the Christians in Corinth and in Philippi. Paul’s thankfulness for all these people shines through his letters despite their many problems and issues. Only Paul’s letter to the Galatians lacks any thanksgiving for the Christians there, but that’s a story for another day!

A Thanksgiving resolution

If you are deeply connected into the fellowship that is St. Andrew, I know that you have been richly blessed. If you are only marginally connected, I urge you to resolve to deepen your connection to this fellowship of believers. If you do, I’m confident that next Thanksgiving, your prayers of gratitude will, like my own, include these people of grace.

¹Paul doesn’t get to Rome until the early 60’s AD, and then it is as a prisoner of Rome. Though under house arrest, Paul was surely able to spend much time with the Christians in Rome.

²Colossae was a city in southwestern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). By Paul’s day it was a city in decline, helped along by a calamitous earthquake in 60 or 61 AD.

Donning New Clothes

“The Emperor’s New Clothes” was one of my favorite Hans Christian Anderson stories. There was, of course, the juvenile fascination with nakedness, but I also think that I was intrigued by the story’s several morals. As you may recall, the Emperor was a vain man whose only ambition was to dress well. His vanity led him to fall for a transparent con and his new clothes turned out to be no clothes at all! In today’s passage from Colossians, Paul urges us to don a new wardrobe that is fitting for those who have been raised to life with Christ. Rather than exposing our nakedness, this wardrobe dresses us in the image of our Creator.

We have stripped off our old selves and put on our new selves. Off with the old clothes, on with the new. Paul works this metaphor really hard in this passage from Colossians. Why? Perhaps, Paul has in mind the baptism practices of the early church. Many of the Christians in the first century were converts from paganism and came into the Christian community as adults. Frequently, they would wear old clothes to the baptism and emerge from their immersion to put on a new set of white clothes, signifying the purity of the new life they were entering.

This transformation encompasses our whole being. Intellectually, we believe things that we didn’t before, about ourselves, this world, about our purpose in life, and so on. Morally, we gain a different sense of right and wrong, of good and evil. Behaviors, thoughts, even TV shows and movies, which once seemed harmless, no longer do. Emotionally, we love differently. We lavish less love upon ourselves and pour out our love upon God and one another. We become spiritually open to God, but also to the spiritual needs of others. The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The renewal, the transformation, that Paul speaks of is real. It is as concrete as Jesus’ own death and resurrection. But it is also only the beginning. We still must learn to walk in the Spirit of Christ, to walk in God’s way, to walk in a manner befitting the new clothes that we wear. Paul knows that we are talking about a process, not merely a moment. It is why he speaks of the new self as *being* renewed. It is in the same sense as our proclamation that God’s kingdom has come *already*, but *not yet* in all its fullness. We have been renewed *and* we are being renewed. We have been saved *and* we are being saved.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, NOV 18 – 24

Sunday, 2 Samuel 11:27b - 12:1-15a The prophet Nathan tells David a parable. What do you think is the point of the parable? In most cases, looking for a single main point in a parable is the best approach to understanding the parable. Also, parables were meant to subvert the world of the hearer. What is David’s response to the parable?

Monday, 2 Samuel 12:15b-25 The son born of David’s and Bathsheba’s murderous adultery dies. How does the writer of 2 Samuel understand this death? How do you? How does David respond to the death? When David and Bathsheba have another son, who does this child grow up to be? In their household, what consequences do you think will flow from this tragic affair?

Tuesday, 2 Samuel 13 This story is a prologue to the coming rebellion of David’s son, Absalom. What is Tamar’s role in this story? Were these events foreshadowed by the story of David and Bathsheba? If so, how? Amnon and Absalom were born to different mothers when Saul was still king (see 2 Samuel 3:1-5). Keeping all the family relationships straight is important though a bit tricky. Tamar is Absalom’s full sister but only the half-sister of Amnon. These Old Testament characters are far from models of right behavior. Why did the Israelites hang on to such stories about their ancestors?

Wednesday, 2 Samuel 14 Joab, David’s right-hand man, with the help of a wise woman, Tekoa, comes up with a plan for bringing Absalom back to Jerusalem. What is the plan and how well does it work?

Thursday, 2 Samuel 15:1 – 16:14 Though reconciliation between father and son seems to have come, it is too late. Too much has happened in the five years since Absalom first fled. He begins to plot a rebellion against his father. David has to flee Jerusalem!

Friday, 2 Samuel 16:15 – 17:29 Absalom consolidates his control over the kingdom. But David is warned of a pending attack. This is a story of the treacherous turncoat v. the loyal undercover agent!

Saturday, 2 Samuel 18:1-18 In the battle between the forces of David and those of Absalom, the son dies. What are the circumstances of his death?

Sermon Notes

A Dickens of a Christmas

Are you hoping for a Christmas season with more joy and less stress?

If so (and who isn't!), we hope that you'll join us for a special Advent series in Scott Engle's Sunday morning class. We'll look at the world-transforming coming of Jesus Christ through the familiar Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*. Without ever referring to Jesus by name, Dickens created a memorable story about the power of Christmas (hint, Christ!) to transform lives.

This four-week series will begin on Sunday, December 2.
Scott's class meets every Sunday in Festival Hall at 11am.

Coming in January: *Exploring World Religions* at 11:00, as well as two Sunday morning Bible Academy classes at 9:30!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Do you find yourself truly excited about the many blessings you've been given by God? If not, what can we do to capture that sense of joy and excitement . . . an excitement and enthusiasm for God that is so consuming we couldn't help but tell others about it? Our spirit of thanksgiving would just come bursting out of us! Perhaps, we need to look beyond what God has "done for us lately" to the larger gift of being God's chosen and beloved. Such a gift is not meant to be hoarded; it is meant to be shared. For we at St. Andrew have been richly blessed by God. This community is a blessing to all who belong. Our challenge is always to remember that the charge given us by God is to be a blessing to others – to be the salt of the earth and the light to the world. Bright lights shine always and in all directions! What are you doing to share your light with others?

Thanksgiving is the right time to simply reflect upon the ways in which you have been blessed by God and by St. Andrew. You might share some stories about the most meaningful and memorable experiences you've had at St. Andrew or with other members of the St. Andrew family. What difference has St. Andrew made in your own life? What hopes do you have for St. Andrew? In 2008, we'll be talking more about where we go from here. What things about that journey will be most important to you?