

Paul's Prayer

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St. Andrew's - Westridge

I deeply dislike the process of picking out greeting cards. There are so many of them. They are so expensive. And so many of them are bad — but it's impossible to know how bad until you open it and read the stuff trying to pass for poetry on the inside.

I developed work around strategies. For a long time, I only gave congratulatory cards. These tend to not be terribly wordy, and I believe serve for almost any occasion. Congratulations, you had baby! Congratulations, you got married! Congratulations, it's your birthday! Congratulations, you made it out of surgery without dying!

I did this for years, but I had to give up the congratulatory card system when I had to find anniversary cards. "Congratulations, you're still married to me!" didn't sound right. For a while I did blank cards only — that way the lazy terrible poetry on the inside could be of my own invention. But that's a lot of work.

So these days, I go card hunting. And every once in a while, I experience that rare joy of finding the perfect card. I pull it out of the row, open it up, and find inside something that says exactly what I want to say in exactly the idiosyncratic way I want to say it.

The Holy Bible is not the greeting card aisle at Target. But that feeling of finding the perfect card is the closest image I can come to the way I felt reading the beginning of this passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. As a priest and pastor, there are few times when the few lines of scripture appointed for Sunday worship have so perfectly captured exactly what I want to say to the church which I serve.

There's verse 3: "We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing." Verse 4: "Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith."

We — in this case Fr. Mike and I — literally boast of you among the churches of God. For your steadfastness, faith, and yes, even endurance.

There are these moments in Paul's letters to his churches, and this is one of them, when you just get this sense of how proud Paul is, of the way the church is responding to God, and of what God is doing through them. And Mooneyham Elementary School is a long way from Thessalonica, but I have a pretty good sense of what Paul was feeling.

The first verses contain Paul's thanksgiving prayer; the last two verses of our reading contain Paul's petitionary prayer for these people. There are three parts to it, and we're going to look at them one by one.

It begins in verse 11: "To this end we always pray for you," — and then here's the first thing — "asking that our God will make you worthy of his call." So the first thing is worthiness. To be worthy means that one's value or character is adequate to the role they are filling. For example, and this is purely hypothetical, one could ask this about the candidates for President. "Is [insert name here] worthy of the calling of president of the United States?" is to ask, "Does [same name] have sufficient merit and character to be president?" I won't answer it.

Paul is not referencing being worthy to be president, but rather being worthy of God's call, and God's call is to be united with Christ in the kingdom of God. It's impossible for us, as sinful human beings, to be worthy of that call. But the acknowledgment of our own intrinsic unworthiness is relatively straightforward. We can't stop there. The Son of God didn't become a human being so that we could be reminded of how unworthy we are (the early Jews already had that quite well figured out). No, Jesus came so that we could be made worthy.

Some of you out there I know feel deeply, and profoundly, unworthy. This must become your spiritual starting point, not your spiritual dead end. Don't get this backward: God calls you first, then makes you worthy. If you're waiting to be worthy before you respond to God's love — you're going to be waiting a long time, an eternally long time.

For most Christians, myself included, I think the rubber really hits the road on this worthiness concept when it comes to other people. Like...it's occurred to me a time or two that some people seem to be called to do things they really have no business doing, calls for which they really are unworthy. There's this pastor I know — does not deserve the job he has. Am I the only jerk in here, or do you all know this feeling I'm talking about? Ok, good...

Want to know a powerful anecdote to that? - Pray to God for their worthiness. Ask that God make them worthy. Especially within the church, how powerful would it be if we all prayed for each other's worthiness rather than picked at one another's unworthiness. What could God do with that?

Would you all do that for me? And for Tim and Stephanie? For Fr. Mike, for our Vestry? Pray for our worthiness?

So first, worthiness. Second, power. Look in verse 11 again: "...and [God] will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith." Ok, first things first. Whose power are we talking about here? [God's.] Right. Whose power? God's power.

But in Paul's prayer, God's power is directed to fulfill two quite specific objectives. The first is "every good resolve." Huh...it's almost as if the Thessalonians had resolved to be better Christians than they actually were turning out to be. Which is like almost all Christians always.

My dad had this expression he used when we were growing up and we failed to finish a plate of food we had served ourselves. He's look at our plate, shake his head and say, "It looks like your eyes were bigger than your stomach."

There's a spiritual analogue to that expression: our hearts are bigger than our wills. I regularly plan to be a better person than I am. "Every good resolve," what we'd probably call good intentions are a good place to start; they just weren't any more sufficient in Thessalonica than they will be at New Year's resolution time in January. We actually pray God fill in the gap on this every time we pray the Lord's prayer...one of the things that line "thy will be done" is about is asking God to help us do his will, which we've resolved to do, but find ourselves not actually doing.

When it comes to others, it so worth remembering that people often mean to do better than they do. That recollection might soften our hearts to them, or at least dull the sharp edge of anger and hurt.

The other objective whose fulfillment by God's power Paul prays for is every work of faith. The letter to the Hebrews defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." So works of faith are works whose success lies beyond our own abilities, things that we cannot do on our own. Works whose success is not seen, but confidently hoped for.

I suppose the opposite of a work of faith is a chore. Cleaning the bathroom is not a work of faith. It's pretty clear how to do it. It's a work of Clorox, not of faith.

We start a work of faith when we know we don't have everything we need to get this done, but we're going to do it anyway. This is something you can see at St. Andrew's right now — there are several projects, the starting of this new campus among them, where we've got to have God's power come through and fulfill these works. We cannot do them on our own.

The thing about works of faith is that to those on the outside, they look suspiciously like works of folly. When others take up a work of faith, we often see

them as making a mistake. One of the things I've learned working in ministry is that I am not always good at telling the difference between faith and mistake. There are many flourishing ministries, even right here at St. Andrew's, that I had serious doubts about.

When we see people set off to do things we know they cannot do with what they have, it's easy to ridicule, or even to try to stop them. Again, it's probably better to pray for their work of faith, for God's power to bring that work to fulfillment.

So, Paul prays for worthiness and for power, "so that" (and now we're in verse 12) "the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him."

On the one hand, this language sounds so much like church that it's easy to let it go one ear and out the other. On the other hand, it's ridiculous. God not only uses us to glorify him, but then glorifies us too.

Friends, your end in this life is not fifteen minutes of fame; it's not a viral video of your cat; it's not even the respect of your peers or a packed church at your funeral.

It is so much more than that. Paul's prayer is for the sort of life that make God's name great in the world, the sort of life that — maybe just for one moment on one day — becomes absolutely transparent to the love of God which will shine through you upon others. Your end in this life is glory — God's glory, and yours.

There is a icon, a devotional painting of a saint, known as the Theotokos icon. *Theotokos* means "God-bearer" in Greek, which is really quite the title, and this title was given the Virgin Mary who bore in her own body the divine Son of God, Jesus Christ. In the icon she's holding the baby Jesus in her left arm, and pointing to him with her right, as if to say — focus here, this is what matters, glorify the little God person sitting on my lap.

Mary is the perfect human example without equal of this phenomenon. Was God glorified in her? Absolutely. Was she glorified in him? Definitely, more so than any woman in history.

In each of the first two parts of Paul's prayers, I've applied the topic to our thoughts and prayers for others. Here is no different. Can you pray for another's glory? Can your pray, without jealousy and without reservation, that another be glorified, be elevated in the eyes of others, more than you?

It's not a simple, easy thing. In fact, this whole prayer is not a simple easy thing. It's only easy if we only pray it over ourselves: "Dear God, make me worthy, by your power fulfill my resolve and works of faith, that you be glorified and I in you." That's maybe not so hard. But that's not the example before us; Paul's prayer was for others, not for himself.

Now did Paul need and want all these things as he carried out his ministry of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ? Sure. But one of the ways he went about getting them (and keeping his heart straight) was to pray for them for others. I suspect there's no better way of getting those gifts ourselves than praying that others receive them.

I'll pray for them in you. I'd ask, humbly, that your pray for them in me. And in one another. And in our church at large. God knows we need it.

I must always give thanks to God to you, brothers and sisters, as is right. Amen.