

St. Paul encountered a situation in the church at Ephesus where the Jewish Christians seemed to act as if they were better than the Gentile Christians. It was as if they had achieved their salvation through righteous acts of their own. In the face of this conflict, Paul's letter to the Ephesians explodes with praise. One commentator says the passage we read this morning is "one long, breathless, Greek sentence!" Through it, Paul wants the readers to be reminded that all we have from God comes as a gift. It is not deserved, or earned, or bought for any price. Whatever goodness there is in our lives is not motivated by the thought that we can thereby obtain salvation, but, rather, that the victory has already been won for us and because it has, there is something to celebrate. Our goodness is the by-product of God's goodness toward us. We love because God first loved us. We are blessed to be a blessing.

That's not necessarily an easy concept for people hooked on the idea of self-help. Just look at the do-it-yourself section in any bookstore and you'll see how much we want to be self-reliant, independent, pull-ourselves-up-by-the-bootstraps people. When we come to church, it is often to learn how to live better lives. And sometimes we do learn. But Sunday morning is not just a time to jot down helpful hints for happy hearts on our little moral notepads or receive our ethical assignment for the week. This wonderfully exuberant shout of praise at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us that church is a place of praise. We are called to a much bolder, morally riskier task than simply obeying God's rules. We are called, through our praise, to sign, signal, and witness the advent of a kingdom, a countercultural place where the prisoners, the poor, and the wretched of the earth are royalty and all things are made new. Our worship is not simply a sign of the coming reign of God. It is a manifestation of the presence of God's reign. Here the kingdom is made tangible and visible. Here, God is enthroned upon the praises of God's people.

Like many of you, I have watched with interest as events unfolded in the General Convention of this Church during the last two weeks. I drove to Indianapolis on last Monday to sit in on several sessions and, in particular, I sat in the gallery to observe the House of Bishops discuss the resolution that would authorize the blessing of same sex covenant relationships. What amazed and heartened me even more than the outcome of that discussion was the way the bishops treated one another with respect and graciousness. I knew how strongly some of those bishops felt about this issue and how divided their house has been over the years by this one topic. They were struggling with how to live with the liberty that is ours in Christ. To see how the Holy Spirit lifted them above rancorous debate and led them through a thoughtful, patient, godly discussion was the experience of a lifetime for me. It was clear that they had set their hope on Christ and it was also clear that, whatever the outcome of their vote, that's where their hope would continue to rest!

Our work and worship together is not first and foremost a celebration of clean living, hard work, and ethical accomplishments. It is, first and foremost, an outpouring of praise to the God who has saved us in Jesus Christ. Praise is the first good work of our lives in response to the news of what God has already done for us. Praise doesn't make salvation happen any more than fireworks make American liberty happen. Salvation makes praise happen. If people are not engaged in the practice of praise, you have to wonder what they think about what God has done. Nietzsche spoke for many outside the church when he said: "You must look more redeemed if I am to believe in your Redeemer."

Whenever the church cuts loose and becomes emotionally extravagant, this praise is our way of being in love and, by our lives, being a sign, a signal, a witness to the onset of a new heaven and a new earth. The waters of baptism are a gift to us. They tell us who and whose we are and their cleansing promise flows through us all our lives. When we, the baptized, pour this water upon another one of God's children, we are being emotionally extravagant, lavishing the gift of adoption into God's family upon one God has claimed as his very own! That news is something to celebrate

all our lives. The bread and cup of the Eucharist are set before us not because somebody thought it might be a beautiful and sweet ceremony to remember Jesus. They are set before us by order of Jesus to express his promise and his gift to us in a covenantal banquet. They are his pledge to us. They are food for the journey he calls us to make. Our response is praise and thanksgiving. We make a throne of our hands and receive him into our hearts. The emblems are offered without price to be a means of the grace of Christ. We don't and we can't deserve them. They are given to nourish our continued praise.

Not long ago I was driving on a winding road in the Texas hill country and as I rounded a sharp curve, I spotted a crudely made sign some Christian had placed on top of a big rock: "Get right with God" it said. I suppose the motivation was to warn me that I'd better get myself fixed up with God right now because my car might blow a tire and crash into a tree and I wouldn't want to meet my maker without having made things right first. But the warning is founded upon the wrong premise. The sign tells me that I must get right with God by my own efforts. The gospel of Jesus tells me that I am already right with God through his efforts. Maybe the sign ought to say, " In Jesus Christ, You are right with God. Sing, Pray, Shout Hallelujah!"

Our celebration of Independence Day is fresh on our minds. It reminded us that the civil liberties we enjoy in this country were won for us by another generation. They have been given to us as an inheritance, a gift. An even greater gift is the liberty we have as children of God. That liberty has been won for us on the cross of Christ. It is our inheritance, a gift. Our first and foremost act is to explode into praise whenever we are reminded of the gift, and tell God how much we love being loved by him!

Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.