

The Hope To Which We Are Called

St. John's United Church of Christ

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Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

“There is nothing more we can do.”

I listened as the out-going dean, John Kampen, said these words to those graduating from the Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio. He reminded them – as if they needed reminding! – that their work was done, and the faculty's teaching was done. It was time for them to go! Knowing John, I knew he was saying this as much for his own benefit as for the students. He had just passed over the duties of dean after giving his whole heart and soul to the job for the past five years. He, too, had to be coming to grips with closing this chapter of his life and moving on to another.

As I looked at the graduates, and the families and friends who came to support them, I found myself imagining the wide range of emotions those words might stir up: joy, regret, relief, fear, excitement, sadness – or a combination of all of those! Coming to the end of one chapter of your

life can be freeing, but it can also be terrifying. When we are so directed and focused on one particular thing and it suddenly comes to an abrupt stop, what happens next?

Graduates everywhere are being asked that question, “So, what are you doing next? What are your plans now?” We all face that question in small and big ways. The pink slip arrives, a spouse passes away, a project is completed, we learn the levy has failed and so our sports team is history, or something we have been looking forward to and planning for awhile comes and goes. And the question is: **What do we do between the end of something and whatever is going to happen next?**

In this passage from Acts, we hear Jesus’ graduation speech. Jesus tells the crowd that there is nothing more he can do and that he is out of there! The churchy word for what you are about to hear is Ascension. We call this Ascension Sunday, because it is on this day Jesus ascended to heaven from the earth.

Acts 1:1-10

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly

two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

The apostles heard Jesus’ graduation speech. They heard him say, “Okay, there is nothing more I can do here. Gotta go!” And they stood there, stuck in their tracks, looking up in the sky. No doubt they were experiencing a flood of emotion and trying to make sense of their own lives in light of this new development. They found themselves in an “in-between” time, needing some direction and encouragement.

Now the letter Jennifer read from Ephesians wasn’t written to this group of people specifically; it was most probably written in the last third of the first century, but it was written to a group of people who were trying to be faithful, and trying to be the church. It is written to a “post-ascension people” who are trying to live their lives in light of what they knew of this person called Jesus. The letter is attributed to Paul, but there is some debate over whether he is actually the author.

This letter of encouragement was written to the people in the first century, and yet today, centuries later, we are still a people in need of encouragement and direction. I found myself wondering how Paul, or one of Paul’s apostles, might phrase a letter written to those of us here in Columbus, Ohio who are trying to be faithful in 2009. I searched, and I found such a letter! I found the letter from Paul as I was rummaging around in my own imagination. I hope you will indulge me as I read it to you this morning:

Dearest people of Columbus, Ohio: I have heard of you and the people of St. John’s Church. I have heard of your faith in God and your love toward all those around you. I have heard about

your faithfulness in tough times and your generosity to those in need, and for all of these reasons I do not cease to give thanks to you as I remember you in my prayers.

I have heard about the difficult economic challenges in Columbus and your entire country. I have heard about the double-digit unemployment rates and the number of programs that are closing in your community. I have heard about the increase of people needing food and shelter and healthcare. I pray that you do not lose hope in these tough times!

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of all that is, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation through the living of your days, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which God has called you.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened like Wayne, a recently retired gentleman who once thought his years of hard work would provide for an affluent life of leisure in the later years of his life. Recently he has been worried about his shrinking portfolio and concerned that he wouldn't be able to take the number of trips he and his wife were used to or dine out at the finest places. Two weeks ago Wayne held his first grandchild in his arms and the eyes of his heart were enlightened, "I can't explain it, but holding this baby provides more joy than I could have ever have anticipated. He may be rather ugly to some people, but I think he is the most beautiful child in the world. Holding this baby is holding hope."

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened like Jacob Green, a 15-year-old in your community who is a sophomore at Grove City High School. Jacob and his other classmates were devastated when they heard the news that their athletic programs were to be cut, along with the \$8 million other cuts throughout the school district, after a property-tax request was voted down

on May 5th. The administration had essentially said, “there is nothing we can do” in the face of this vote. Initially, Jacob and his classmates wanted to protest the cancellation of sports by walking out of classes to play pickup games. But after a conversation with the principal, the eyes of his heart were enlightened. They decided to organize a rally. They held a flag-football tournament where 150 athletes and onlookers played games and enjoyed being together. The tournament set the stage for an all-out effort that the students are making to campaign for the levy that will be put back on the ballot in August. Once angry and feeling paralyzed, Green and others are now filled with hope. Just the other day he said, *“We need to stick together, to keep playing. Everyone wants to stay at Grove City High School. They want to stay here and support the schools. A lot of people want to stay and fight. We want to get all of the voters who voted not to vote for it, and the voters who did not vote to vote.”*

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened as so many are in Columbus and around the country when they decide it is time for them to volunteer and try to help another. Across the country and across your great city you are seeing a “compassion boom.” When times were good it was easier to insulate yourselves and not think about people around you who are suffering. From the *The Largest Table* to the Holy Family Soup Kitchen more people are stepping up to volunteer; from the neighbors who are pulling their resources together to help with baby-sitting, carpooling, and lawn care to people everywhere becoming more aware of their own vulnerability, more sensitive to the needs of others, more resourceful, and more giving.

I pray that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which God has called you. I pray that you might see, feel, and know the interconnectedness of all human beings. I pray that during these tough times your values are clarified and that you come to

cherish people more than things. I pray that during these tough times you will become more creative and more resourceful and more willing to take risks so that you might experience anew the glorious creation our God has given us. I pray that as one chapter of your life comes to an end or a door closes, you will not see it as an end but as a beginning of something new.

Dearest people of Columbus and members and friends of St. John's Church, God did not stop acting when Jesus ascended from this earth, and I pray that you will never lose the faith that God is still acting and still speaking when one chapter of your life comes to an end. Indeed, perhaps it is just when you are willing to admit that "there is nothing more you can do" with a degree, a program, a job, a relationship, or a house that you will realize that there is plenty that God can do with and through you.

God put God's power to work in the person of Jesus. He lived on this earth, side by side with humanity, and then he ascended from this earth. Jesus promised in the last line of the gospel of Matthew that he would be with us until the end of the ages. Jesus is not with you as an historical figure, but he is present, nonetheless. Jesus is present with you in the form of a grandchild who breathes new hope into your very being. Jesus is present with you in the form of a principal who hears your concerns and who helps you see that she is on your side. Jesus is present with you through the many people of Columbus who are being inspired to volunteer and to give more to others during these challenging times. Jesus is present with you in a community that gathers in the middle of the city at the corner of Third and Mound each week, to sing and pray and share life and faith together.

Dearest people of St. John's, I never cease giving thanks for you. Do not lose hope during these hard times! May you always know with your whole being that even when, perhaps especially

when, “there is nothing more you can do,” the God to whom we give all praise and glory can and will do plenty!

With gratitude, I remain faithfully yours,

Paul.

Amen.