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First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
November 1, 2015 All Saints Sunday
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Benediction and Barbecue A Meditation for All Saints Sunday

Ephesians 3:14-21 NRSV For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

One of the reasons that some folks, going back 1800 years, have wondered whether the Apostle Paul really wrote the Letter to the Ephesian church – or whether it was written by a disciple of his who sought to honor him by writing in his name – is that by and large the Book of Ephesians is not boring! Unlike the gospels which are rich in stories and parables and memorable people whom Jesus encountered, in Paul offers no such stories at all, and you can go long stretches in his letters where you have to slog and force yourself to pay attention to some pretty complex sentences and complicated theological points. That's why this particular passage today is so unusual, and therefore many have wondered if it was actually written by Paul. For it's **not** boring at all, in fact it's beautiful and eloquent and enthusiastic, even. We think of Paul as sober, and serious, and earnest, and today's text just seems so unlike the Paul that we are familiar with – for Paul is many things but exiting and enthusiastic are not words we usually associate with him.

Today's passage is indeed different; it **is** beautiful and full of joy and enthusiasm. But's that's, in fact, a very good reason to pay extra attention to what he's saying here, as we continue this short series on Ephesians on this All Saints Sunday and as we

continue look at this letter as a kind of summation of the most important elements of Christian faith. And while we could spend weeks on this passage because it so rich, I want to focus on just three things that I think Paul is telling us about the essential elements of the Christian faith.

The first is this: **An attitude of “benediction” is the first and most important Christian virtue**; it is the secret to a life that can be lived with a sense of peace – even when life may not always be easy. Did you hear those verses at the very end of this passage? *“Now to [the One] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”* Do you realize what those lines are? They are a **benediction**. And when do benedictions usually come? At the *end* of things. These lines are similar to lines that do in fact come at the end of several of Paul’s other letters, but here they are smack dab in the middle. Why is that and what does it mean? Well, I think it is an indication that thanksgiving, saying benediction – which of course literally means “good word” – over life is something you don’t just do a special times, or at the end of life, or even at the end of the day, or just on Sundays. No, an attitude of “benediction,” of praising God for what God has done in your life and for this world, is appropriate and needed – sometimes needed most of all – right smack dab in the middle of life’s muddledness and messiness.

You see, it is on days when you are feeling drained, or when too many things are competing for too little attention, or when your heart is full of worry, maybe then is precisely the time we need to praise God most of all! You know it’s one of my very favorite quotations, because you’ve heard me cite it before, but it is once again so very apt; the eloquent African-American preacher Gardner Taylor once remarked: *“I have never known anyone who was truly and profoundly grateful who could also at the same time be mean-spirited, or small, or vicious, or petty, or self-righteous.”* If Taylor were

talking about this in terms of today's scripture, I think he could just as easily have used the word "benediction" instead of "gratefulness." For they come to the same thing. What Taylor is talking about is something I suspect all of us recognize: think of those people in your life who consistently give you life and energy, who exude hope, who – to use the biblical phrase – are a **blessing** by their very presence. Aren't every one of them folks whom you would describe as full of gratitude, full of "benediction," not just at some moments but most moments? Aren't they the ones who make you more grateful for life because of theirs? Paul is reminding us that expressing that gratitude, a sense of benediction, will make us better people. Expressing our gratitude, a sense of benediction – even in the face of moments that are worrying, annoying, or burdening us – will bring a greater sense of peace to our lives.

So that's the first essential element I would glean today from Paul's words here: **An attitude of "benediction" is the first and most important Christian virtue.** And that leads us to the second essential point that we need to remember about our faith – and it is a warning: **Our own gratitude, our own sense of benediction, never, ever gives us license to demonize or hurt or slander people who do not believe as we do.** Let me explain what I mean by talking about one of my favorite subjects - barbecue. You see, I have a rule about barbecue: ***"Every barbecue is good."*** Now in my younger days I was much more exclusionary and presumptuous and had been known to say things like *"The only **real** barbecue is to be found in Kansas City."* Now, of course, for some, those are fighting words, for barbecue devotees can spend an enormously obsessive amount of time on the ***"real"*** way to do barbecue. Is sauce to be put on the meat while smoking it? Kansas City-style aficionados would say "of course," while west Tennessee-style barbecue-lovers would sneeringly say that's not ***real*** barbecue. In southeast Missouri I once bit into a chopped barbecue sandwich only to find that it had a layer of coleslaw on top, something I had never encountered before

(and hope to never encounter again) and when I asked I was told this is the only “*real*” way to do barbecue.

But here’s the thing: when I say “*The only real barbecue is to be found in Kansas City*” – or my Missouri or Tennessee or south Texas friends say something similar about their venues – I am not saying that that is **literally** true. That would be silly. You see this way of talking is really what someone once called “doxological” talk. That’s the adjective form of something we do every Sunday: we sing the Doxology. Which means, literally, “to give praise and thanks” – much like a benediction. So with that in mind, testimonies to the “realness” of this or that barbecue are actually not to be taken *literally*, but instead as expressions of the speaker’s thanks, if you will, for having been able to eat such wonderful food, and praise for how good it was, and, if not life changing, how very, very much it added to his life’s gustatory pleasures.

Now how does all this relate to Paul’s belief that an essential element of the Christian life is an attitude of benediction, and his warning that we are never, ever given license to demonize or hurt or slander people who do not believe as we do. Did you notice how Paul begins today’s passage? He says this: “**I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.**” It’s a beautiful counterpart to his attitude of benediction. But it can go terribly wrong is– as has happened, sadly, too often in Christian history – when folks who believe that indeed God is the maker and the creator of all peoples encounter folks who do not believe that and then these believers decide that those folks must be punished for that attitude. Or, worse, that they are not even worthy of living. Or that they can be safely dehumanized because after all there must be something fundamentally wrong with them if they don’t acknowledge the Lordship of God through Jesus Christ. It is especially crucial for us to remember not to say and do such things in an era in which too many pundits and mean-spirited bloggers and even some preachers are doing exactly those things to our

Muslim brothers and sisters. For you see, that rule about barbecue should also always remind us is that it is *never right to hate, or belittle, or demonize, or dehumanize another person because of what we know God has truly done in our lives.* We ought never find ourselves unintentionally sliding from saying “*I love my God*” to anything like the statement “*People who don’t love my God are unworthy.*” Because from there, it’s too short a harrowing slide to hatred, demonizing, and even genocide. Now, please hear me: I truly do believe that God is the maker of all peoples, the “Father,” as Ephesians has it, of all creation. I also think that those who don’t believe that may sometimes live lives that aren’t as rich and beautiful as they could be, more anxious than they have to be. To say “*Jesus is my Lord*” before whom I bend my knee expresses **my** thanksgiving for what God has done in and through my life for which I am so, so grateful. But hear this: such an affirmation on your part or mine doesn’t mean that God can’t work in other ways among other peoples in other places with other traditions. We don’t get to decide to whom God will be gracious and what form God’s grace will take, whether it is in the life of a devout Jew or Muslim or Christian. So to repeat what I think we can glean as a second essential point from today’s scripture: **Our own gratitude, our own sense of benediction, never, ever gives us license to demonize or hurt or slander people who do not believe as we do.**

My favorite line in today’s passage is this: “**I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ... so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**” The word “comprehend” here is an old word with an old meaning that this translation doesn’t do justice. The word here also means “to measure.” In other word, Paul is saying “**I pray that you will have the power to measure well so that you will truly know God.**” And that leads me to the third point: **Be sure you are measuring with the right standards – else you will not know God in all the**

richness that you could. A tourist visiting downtown Colorado Springs once asked me how far it was to Pueblo. If I had handed him a measuring tape and said “Well, I’ll hold it while you check” that would have been rather unhelpful. \

You see, from the time a baby first learns to begin measuring the distance accurately between a spoonful of mashed peas and her mouth to a dozen occasions every day in our adult lives, it is important to keep the right measuring standards in mind. Because using the wrong ones can prove funny, dangerous, unhelpful, or even disastrous. After all, someone who approaches every situation, every new person, with a measuring stick of suspicion will inevitably find a suspicious world in front of him. But those who approach life with a yardstick marked off, as it were, in units of gentleness and gratitude, of benefit-of-the-doubt and benediction, will also inevitably find that their world is indeed a kinder and gentler place than that of those who are inclined to measure things more harshly. So as we seek to comprehend the breadth and length, the height and depth, of this wonderful, complex, sometimes scary, sometimes sad, sometimes joyful, always messy life that God has given us, let us measure with the right standard. Let us measure with the conviction that God is love unfailing and justice unstinting. Let us measure and comprehend that God wants for us not a life of fear and anxiety, but a life where we know we are loved unconditionally. Let us measure, let us comprehend with **those** standards in mind and, indeed, we **can** know the fullness of God inhabiting your lives.

On this All Saints Sunday, I am remembering and giving thanks for so many saints who indeed taught me and all of us about that attitude of gratitude, about the blessings of benediction, about the right way to measure life and faith. I think of Dick Anderson and his unfailing generosity and his infectious laughter. I think of Ron Parker, mentor to me and to so many, and the soul of gentleness who could lift me up with a word of hope. I think of David Woods and remember the times we had coffee together

and recall his passion for good coffee, a passion that was a small index of the way he cared so deeply for so many. I think of Cathy McClellan and that smile that so graced her face and all that she did for so many over so many years I think of Brady Fowler and his ever-present words of encouragement even when his body was so frustratingly failing him. I look at all the names in our bulletin today and give thanks indeed that these saints showed us something in their own distinctive ways of what it means to live in the light of unconditional love and grace.

So as we close today, let us take three things from the lives of these saints and from the words of Ephesians this morning: **An attitude of benediction, a reminder never to let that sense of God's goodness in our lives license the belittling of those who believe differently, and the reminder that when we seek to understand, to comprehend, to measure our lives, we need to use the right measuring standard – the unconditional love of God that we haven known through Jesus Christ.** For then indeed we can know that “power at work within us [which] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine....” Far more. Far, far more. For that good news, thanks be to God. Amen.