

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 15-A (15 August 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14, Psalm 111, Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58

1 Paul: Pay Attention!

Our Epistle reading today is translated very somberly in the NRSV, “Be careful.” But in Greek it’s much simpler than that. It’s just “Look!” or “Look carefully!” It’s the kind of thing my family members tell me when I can’t find something in the cabinet. “Look again!” What they’re saying is, *this isn’t hard: you can do it. You just need to pay attention!*

That’s what Paul is telling the Christians in Ephesus as well as us today. Following Jesus isn’t complicated. It just means paying attention and making choices. Paul is pointing to a clear choice that every Christian must make for themselves.

One choice he describes as “foolish,” a choice that is consistent with evil days and a habit of drunkenness. We see the effects of choices like this in individual lives of selfishness, abuse, and addiction. Evil days become even more obvious in a community setting where we can see the ill-effects of cheating, scheming, breaking promises, stealing, and looking out solely for one’s own narrow interests. Evil days are writ large upon the world around us as we struggle with the pandemic, with climate change, with dysfunctional governments, with evil practices like genocide, warfare, and oppression that are displacing record numbers of refugees – or locking them up inside concentration camps.

Paul also describes a choice that he labels as wise. Wise living, says Paul, is characterized by the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It is found in the practice of giving thanks to God at all times and for all things. This doesn’t mean calling bad things good and thanking God for the evil days that break our hearts: but it does mean cultivating eyes to see and ears to hear, habits of encountering God’s quiet voice, God’s powerful presence, and God’s merciful, redemptive activity even in the midst of the those noisy, evil days.

2 Solomon: Choose wisdom

Paul is echoing a consistent theme from scripture, the choosing of wisdom over foolishness, that is personified in a special way by Solomon from our first reading today. Solomon is offered a boon from God. What would you ask for if a genie gave you three wishes? The three things most anybody would ask for, 3,000 years ago just as much as today, would be long life, wealth, and victory over all one's enemies. I wouldn't think of the person who asks for these things as foolish right off the bat. But I have seen these kinds of foolishness: haven't you?

I have been in a hospital room of a patient dying from H1N1. Their spouse was there and the doctors had kept the patient alive, though unconscious, so they could say goodbye. The patient's body was dramatically failing, but the spouse would not give the doctor the OK to let nature take its course. Thus the patient continued to be hit with drugs and, eventually, CPR, every ten minutes for more than an hour. That's not what I want for the last hours of *my* life. Our Christian hope is for something more than just a few more breaths in a worn out body. Faith is what enables us to accept the finitude of our bodies, and to trust in God's eternal promises.

Who hasn't seen someone do something foolish for the promise of money? Or do something that negates their own integrity, their own humanity, for the sake of gaining a small victory over someone else?

But Solomon chooses a better way. Solomon displays extraordinary wisdom by asking for God's wisdom, for understanding and discernment that might help him to govern God's people well. Solomon is asking for the capacity to abide in God's presence, to walk in God's ways, and to experience the goodness of life with God. Solomon had obviously learned something from his experience of God so far.

3 Jesus: Eat, drink: abide

This is the same message we get from Jesus in our Gospel reading today. This is the fourth week in a row that our lectionary has called for us to read from Jesus' "Bread of Life" discourse. And we still have another week to come! But as we have progressed in this discourse in John chapter 6, Jesus' imagery has become increasingly visceral and Eucharistic. Jesus says that those who "eat my flesh and drink my blood"¹ are promised resurrection and eternal life. Do you hear how by seeking Jesus rather than long life, eternity will be gained? As we eat Jesus' flesh and drink Jesus' blood in the Eucharist, says Jesus, we will **abide** in Jesus, and Jesus in us. We will take part in the eternal resurrected life which Jesus manifested.

It's not that the little bits of bread and wine we share in the Eucharist are magic pills. But instead it is our repeated practice of the Eucharist that slowly, over time, changes us, shapes us, transforms us. It is like Paul's invitation to sing psalms and give thank to God *for* everything and *in* everything. These spiritual practices of song and prayer and thanksgiving are ways that God reaches into our lives and **abides** with us. The Daily Office was invented as Christians sought to figure out how to abide with God throughout the day. When we make choices to worship, to serve, to practice kindness, to choose the way of love, which is the way of wisdom, we engage ever more deeply with God's world and help to incarnate God's presence just as Jesus did.

¹Jn 6.54

Generally speaking it's not hard to be a Christian. There are places around the world where Christians are persecuted, but they sure aren't here in the United States. Instead we **abide** in Jesus by paying attention day by day to all the *little* choices, the *minor* decisions. Because choices become habits. And abiding habits define our way of life. Abiding with Jesus is a wise choice that we get to make.

But the best part of it is: the fact you even know you *have* that choice is evidence that Jesus has already chosen you. What you are hearing is Jesus' personal invitation in this moment and in some small thing. Faith is not about moving mountains – at least not in the beginning. It is about noticing the ways that God is already active, inviting, loving in your life. Faith is choosing to say “yes” in response to God's invitation *today*. So if you don't see God, don't notice what God is up to in your life today, I can only repeat what my family tells me, and Paul tells the church. *Look again!*

Amen.