

The Promise of Living 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Reign of Christ Sunday/ 22nd November 2020

Grace and gratitude. This portion of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth reminds us that a dynamic core of the Christian life is the free-flowing movement between grace and gratitude. Paul is praising the Corinthians for their generous support of the collection he's taking up for the saints, that is, the Christians in Jerusalem going through difficult times, and he's giving thanks to God—for the abundance of God's grace and provision and for the way God was working through them.

Grace always produces gratitude and expressions of gratitude always lead us back to grace. The more we experience God's generous grace toward us, the more our hearts are moved to respond with gratitude. Just as grace is experienced in a variety of ways in our lives, so, too, is gratitude.

The apostle Paul is often described as the theologian of grace because he knew, first-hand, the transforming power of God's grace, made real for him in the face of Jesus Christ. When Paul experienced the enormous generosity of God's love and grace toward him (see Acts 9), it released something enormously generous and generative in him. "God is able," Paul told the Corinthians, "to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8). When we encounter this grace, experience it, when we're pursued by grace and it finds us we discover that we are free to be generous because there's more than enough to go around—providing we share it. There's never any risk of losing what we have because we don't really have anything that belongs to us. So we are free to share.

In Marilynne Robinson's remarkable novel *Gilead*, the ailing Congregationalist minister John Ames tells his son, "There is more beauty than our eyes can bear, precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm."¹

This sentence sums up the Reformed or Calvinist claim that grace and gratitude are at the heart of the Christian life. Marilynne Robinson, herself a person of deep faith and searing insight, is a great lover of John Calvin (1509-1564)—she understands Calvin better than most. Calvin wrote a lot about beauty and his theology permeates her works, including *Gilead*, especially this one sentence.² Beauty is all around us, more than our eyes can bear, beauty not of our own making. It's prevenient beauty, given, like grace, prevenient grace. Grace, always given *first*. Indeed, much—so much—has been given to us. Precious things have been put into our hands, entrusted to us, and to do nothing to honor them, to fail to acknowledge them, to use them, to share them, even to give them away, is to do great harm. To withhold our gratitude and not be generous with what has been placed into our hands, into our lives, into our bank accounts, especially when we have the capacity to be more grateful and generous, is to do great harm. We then sever the grace-gratitude connection, and our souls suffer as a result.

When the connection is strong, grace frees us to be generous. We become generous not because we have to be, it's not out of duty or obligation, but because we want to. Gratitude for this grace frees us to give *in* and *through* love. God gives to us in joy, in love—all the time. God freely provides us with every blessing in abundance, including life itself, so that having enough of everything we may share it abundantly, joyfully, “for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

The Greek word translated here as “cheerful” is *hilaritas*, from which we get the English word *hilarity*. In the Greco-Roman world, the goddess Hilaritas was the personification of cheerfulness, rejoicing, and mirth. She's often seen holding a cornucopia, a horn of plenty, signifying abundance. We could say, then, that “God loves a hilarious giver.” You know what's it's like to be around someone who is hilarious, she causes you to laugh and laugh with joy, it just flows freely from a deep place, in abundance. And it's contagious. That's what happens when we're caught up in the flow between grace and gratitude. The experience of God's generosity inevitably yields in us a harvest of praise and thanksgiving and lives that find joy in being generous too. “Thanks be to God,” Paul wrote to Christians in Corinth, “for God's indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15).

Grace. Gratitude. Thanksgiving. The Greek word for thanksgiving, *eucharistia*, contains the Greek word for grace, *charis*. Grace, *charis*, is embedded in thanksgiving, in *eucharistia*. *Eucharistia*, from which we get the English word *eucharist*, is, of course, how we refer to the sacrament that takes place at the table of the Lord, the table of communion, this table of thanksgiving. Grace and gratitude. It's all connected.

As we look ahead to gathering at our thanksgiving tables this Thursday, whether this year it's only with members of your household or close friends in your “bubble” or maybe alone, this holiday will feel very odd and even sad. And looking ahead to Advent and Christmas, we are facing a holiday season the likes of which we have never seen before. With the pandemic out of control in the United States, the number of COVID cases rising everywhere, a medical system in places completely overwhelmed, the increasing number of deaths, this is a time of much sadness, fear, and worry. The grief and loss are real, and we need to be honest about this. But there's also something else that's true and we need to place our trust and focus there.

In this destabilizing time we can ground ourselves, root ourselves in giving thanks. We can ground ourselves in gratitude, gratitude for God's grace and providence and God's many blessings in our lives, for what we do have, for the mundane, the ordinary, for the simplest things, for all that which is beautiful in the world, more beauty than our eyes can bear, for the people in our lives, our family, friends, loved ones, for food, for shelter, for breath, for the preciousness of life itself.

The stirring first act finale of Aaron Copland's 1954 opera, *The Tender Land*, set in rural 1930s America, is a chorus that became a stand-alone work known as [*The Promise of Living*](#).³ This piece—its words and music that includes the American folksong hymn “Zion's Walls”—have been swimming around in my head these past weeks. It's a moving reminder that life is a gift worth sharing and it calls us toward praise and gratitude.

*The promise of living with hope and thanksgiving
is born of our loving our friends and our labor.*

*The promise of growing with faith and with knowing
is born of our sharing our love with our neighbor.*

*For many a year we've known these fields
and known all the work that makes them yield.*

*Are you ready to lend a hand?
We'll bring in the harvest, the blessings of harvest.*

*We plant each row with seeds of grain,
and Providence sends us the sun and the rain.
By lending a hand, by lending an arm,
bring out from the farm,
bring out the blessings of harvest.*

*Give thanks there was sunshine, give thanks there was rain.
Give thanks we have hands to deliver the grain.*

*Come join us in thanking the Lord for his blessing.
O let us be joyful. O let us be grateful to the Lord for His blessing.*

*The promise of ending in right understanding
is peace in our own hearts and peace with our neighbor.*

*O let us sing our song, and let our song be heard.
Let's sing our song with our hearts, and find a promise in that song.
The promise of living.
The promise of growing.
The promise of ending is labor and sharing our loving.*

Grateful, indeed.

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Picador Books, 2006), 290.

² On beauty in the Reformed tradition see Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ The libretto was written by librettist Erik Johns (1926-2001). When Catonsville celebrated its bicentennial several years ago, we had an interfaith service held at CPC and this was the anthem chosen for the occasion. Here is a beautiful and moving recording of *The Promise of Living*, arranged by John Williams, with accompanying images.