

Sermon for October 18, 2020  
Commitment Sunday

A couple weeks ago a package came for me at the office. I admit I order from Amazon more than I would like, but I didn't recall ordering anything. So, I was excited to get a surprise package. When I picked it up, I saw it was addressed from Brooklyn. From my friend and colleague Pastor Harriet Wieber and the people of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Flatbush. When I opened the box immediately the word "Hope" jumped out at me; painted in blue on the purple background of a wooden star ornament.

[Show picture of stars on the table]

Digging through the box full of brightly painted stars, I saw other inspirational messages, popping out in vivid color: "Joy, Love, Peace, You Matter."

The letter that came with the stars read, "Dear Pastor Amy, Greetings from South Brooklyn! We of Holy Trinity are keeping you and the good people of St. John's in our prayers as we watch with horror the fires out on the West Coast. For our GWOH project this year we made Stars of Hope, and we send some to you to remind you that you have folks back here in Brooklyn thinking and praying for you..."

[take down picture]

It reminded me of another letter and those like it, that Paul wrote to the people he had connections to. Like the one he wrote to the church in Thessalonica, a piece of which we heard today. "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

This year so far has brought much pain and strain to our lives. It's hard to remember what things were like before the pandemic. And we wonder if they will ever be back to the "normal" we knew before. Families and couples feel stretched and stressed, ready to rip at the seams. Depression and anxiety disorders that may have been manageable before, are being provoked and stirred up in us. That's to say nothing of all the other things in this world that bring uncertainty and instability -- the upcoming election among them. Many of us are on edge about what our nation will look like come November, December, January.

But opening that box of stars with messages of hope and the letter from 2500 miles away, reminded me of blessings that have come even with all the struggle. Because we say that the Body of Christ is a movement of 2 billion followers of Jesus throughout the world. And that we somehow are connected to all those people by our baptisms into that great big family. But so much of what we knew of the Body of Christ was just the small slice of people that gathered on Sunday morning in the sanctuary at St. John's. And though we miss it tremendously, there have been unexpected gifts in worshiping in place. When we do Sunday Evening Prayer and our Zoom watch parties on Sunday morning, we have people joining us from far away places. I have friends in MI and members of my former church participating in SEP. Zayd's parents join us from New York through YouTube with the recorded worship each week. Pete and Jeannette Sorrell have an "auntie" Karin who joins us from VA on Sunday mornings. Our shut-in members have been able to worship with their church for the first time in a long time. And those who have had to move away from us over the last year, some because of the pandemic, are able to stay connected with us through modern technology.

Paul's letter continues, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it."

It is easy for us to focus on what we have lost over this year. How many lives have been diminished by this pandemic. How limited we have been in our ability to connect and build community. How much we don't have that we used to have. And without minimizing those real griefs, can we also, in spite of persecution, receive the word with joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit? To know that God and God's people can be imitators of Christ and examples to the world of what it means to be followers of Jesus amid persecution and struggle and strain?

It is just a coincidence that this famous text from Matthew fell in our stewardship season at St. John's. And I got to be the lucky pastor who wrestles with the question of paying taxes as an election approaches. But the meaning behind this text is more complex than simply apportioning out appropriately what in our lives belongs to the government and the secular realm and what belongs to God. As if we could just separate them and fulfill our obligations in silos, keeping God out of our other business. Instead, Jesus' reply to the Pharisees who wanted to trap him, is a one-liner that leaves them speechless.

Because surely, as people of faith, they understood how his answer makes us more uncomfortable. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." At first hearing it might seem like Jesus is letting us off the hook. Letting us do that

dividing up of our lives and our possessions as we see fit. But people of faith know better. We know that what Jesus is really saying is cause for us to ask *ourselves* a question, “Ok, then, what belongs to God?” or more pointedly, “What *doesn’t* belong to God?”

As with most of what Jesus says in the gospels, this text presents both radical good news and a serious challenge to our worldly values. First the good news -- that the answer to the question is “*nothing.*” *There is nothing and no one* who doesn’t belong to God. Caesar belongs to God. Caesar’s wealth and taxes belong to God. You belong to God and all that you have belongs to God. This is good news right? Right...

And if this is true, then giving to God what is God’s becomes a greater challenge. Because suddenly we can’t just separate our giving into tidy boxes. Now we actually have to wrestle with what it means to give in return for what God has already given. Knowing that our whole lives belong to God.

Gratitude is the way Paul starts his letter to people suffering persecutions and struggles as they try to hold together as the Body of Christ in the world.  
[picture of letter and stars]

And it is what I feel for the connections I have to Christians throughout the world. I was reminded by that box of stars that we are not alone in this work we do for the sake of the gospel of Christ. And that the way it works with Christians is that when some are facing losses and pain others, who are able, step in to encourage and give more. [take down picture]

This is the commitment we make when we say “yes” to our baptismal promises. To be followers of Jesus with our whole selves. Not just the parts we choose to offer.

God held back nothing from us, so what we give back in return matches the abundance of that blessing. As we again make a commitment to give of ourselves this Sunday, we remember the real good news. That Jesus gave himself over completely to Caesar on the cross in order that we might belong completely to God. So then let us, “Give to God what is God’s”