

Message for August 15, 2021

Ephesians 5:15-20

The “2020” Summer Olympic Games came to an end last Sunday and they were unlike all others because of the pandemic. On the one hand there were the thrilling athletic accomplishments as usual; we can think of Penny Oleksiak and the other members of the women’s swim team, Andre De Grasse, Damian Warner and of course the women’s soccer team to mention just a few of our Canadian athletes. On the other hand though, the games almost seemed to be surreal with the opening and closing ceremonies being held in a huge but virtually empty stadium. The venues for the various competitions were virtually empty as well and the award ceremonies were pale imitations of the usual ones. Truly in some ways the Games were the same as usual and yet in other ways they were so very different. I did however notice one constant.

At the conclusion of many races some of the runners, often from the United States and Jamaica, knelt down and offered up a short prayer. None of us of course know the content of those prayers though I would be willing to predict that the general theme was that of gratitude, thanking God for enabling them to run a good race and perhaps even win. There is nothing particularly unusual in this practice but as I watched some of the athletes doing this, it occurred to me that this certainly flies in the face of our society’s values.

For the longest time we Canadians have liked to mock our American neighbours for always going on about their ‘rights’ as guaranteed by their Constitution and Bill of Rights. The obvious example that comes to mind is their insistence on the right to bear arms and the resulting deeply entrenched resistance of many to gun control. Yet while we may like to gently mock our American neighbours for their insistence on their rights, things have been changing up here north of the border. Ever since the adoption of “The Charter of Rights and Freedoms”, we Canadians have been more aware of and insistent upon our own rights. Now there is of course nothing wrong with this; indeed we all believe that everyone has certain rights, even if we don’t always agree about what those rights are! The one thing that this growing insistence and emphasis on rights has done though, is dull our sense of gratitude. This is because if people feel that they have a right to something, are entitled to something, or have somehow earned it, then why should they feel any sense of thankfulness

or gratitude when they get it? After all they are only getting what they deserved in the first place! The Old Testament though warns us about forgetting about our dependence on God, and reasoning that “my work and the strength of my arms have produced this wealth for me”. Even so, this is how many people feel nowadays. Consider this true-life example.

A young woman went to university, worked hard and was an academic success. Upon graduating she wrote thank you notes to all of her professors expressing gratitude for their teaching her and all the support that they had shown her. One Sunday a minister used her as an example of thanksgiving in action but a person in the congregation took exception to this. He said that the young woman had no need or even any business thanking her professors because they had been paid to teach her; why should she bother thanking them for simply doing their job?

This is a small example, yet it captures how many people today feel. Why should we feel any real sense of gratitude for what is essentially a transaction, when someone provides a service and we pay for it? Or why should we feel any gratitude for what we have earned, are entitled to, or have a right to? Truly having a sense of gratitude goes against the grain for many people today. As if that is not enough though, we are also confronted by the demand of today’s scripture passage.

In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul gave the members of the congregation a brief summary of what we would call a Christian lifestyle: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your hearts to the Lord.” There is nothing particularly remarkable, challenging or striking in these words. So far so good but then Paul went on to write: “Always give thanks to God the Father for everything.”

Always give thanks to God the Father for *everything*. This might well give us pause for thought. Many people find it hard to give thanks at all never mind always, and now we have Paul saying that we should thank God for everything, the good and the not so good. This seems to defy common sense and even reality itself! Tragedy strikes and our hearts are broken, or everything that we have ever dreamed of has turned to ashes, and we are supposed to feel grateful? It is so easy to dismiss Paul’s words as pious faith talk bearing no relevance to the ‘real’ world, but that would be a mistake; it would be simply

because whatever else Paul was, he was not an other-worldly dreamer. Indeed Paul was well acquainted with life's heartaches, disappointments and physical suffering.

One person who has wrestled with today's passage is the well-known American preacher, William Willimon. Several years ago he preached a sermon on this text and in it, he personified gratitude so that it was like a real person. I found what he had to say very thought provoking and I thought I would share part of his sermon with you. It is a bit lengthy, but this episode is best told in his own words.

"Paul says to us, 'always and for everything give thanks.'

Isn't this a bit much to ask? I don't mind having Gratitude there for Thanksgiving dinner, or on the day we leave for the family vacation. But always? Everywhere? In every situation?

Every life knows dark days when Gratitude is the last person you want to drop by. It has nothing to do with not liking him. It's just that there is a time and place for everything. There are times and places that he just doesn't fit.

Take death, for instance. Grief? Yes. Anger? Hurt? Doubt? Sadness? Yes, all appropriate guests at a wake, but not Gratitude. Let him come by later when the crying is done.

When the call came we were sitting with Gratitude in the den, having a party to celebrate my mother's recovery from surgery. The phone rang at 11:15 p.m. The voice said 'We did all we could ... everyone is so sorry. She went very quickly.'

Through dark, cold streets we drove, in shock, in disbelief. Papers were signed, clothes collected, a few potted plants and get-well cards, and back home.

Anger, Hurt, Grief, Blaming, all rode back with me from the hospital.

I turned into the driveway. Walked up to my door, opened it. There he was.

‘Don’t you think it’s time for you to go?’ I asked. ‘The party’s over. You take the rest of the champagne with you, if you want. We’ll call you after we get back from the funeral. Don’t call us, we’ll call you.’

And he looked me straight in the eye, and with a voice that mimicked my mother’s, Gratitude said, ‘Say thank you.’

‘Look, I don’t think you’re being very funny,’ I said. ‘You are really very insensitive. Gratitude, you have the poorest timing.’

But he didn’t listen. No, he was already getting down the family photograph albums, at 2:00 a.m., no less, passing them around – pictures of my first steps on the lawn, my second Christmas, my first bicycle, my mother at my sister’s wedding, my mother rocking our children.

And someone began to laugh ... and then we were all laughing and crying and having a warm, wonderful time. Then I understood.

‘Don’t go, Gratitude,’ I said. ‘Please stay. She would want you here. I was wrong. You do belong, even here, especially now. Stay with us through the night and day after tomorrow at the funeral. We’ll need you.’

That night I knew that Paul was right. It is not only possible, but even necessary that we should ‘always and for everything give thanks.’ The presence of Gratitude transforms even the darkest nights into glorious days. For a Christian there is no where we go that Gratitude doesn’t belong.”

This is so very true. As the people of God, we are called to be a grateful and thankful people, and this includes the times when gratitude may well seem to be inappropriate. Oddly enough perhaps, it is the times when we may feel the least grateful that we need to be the most. We need to because it is gratitude for the good of what was and is, that gives us the strength to cope with the here and now. Truly as Paul said, “always give thanks to God the Father for everything.”

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we confess that even at the best of times, we sometimes find it hard to feel grateful for life's many blessings, believing, in our pride and foolishness, that somehow we have earned them or deserve them. Help us we pray not to think this way and grant that we may never lose sight of you and our dependence upon you.

We give you thanks this day for the blessing of our lives, and the lives of everyone so dear to us.

We give you thanks this day that in a world where so many people lack so much, we have so much; food, shelter, clothing, peace and security.

We thank you this day for the gift of yourself made known to us through and by your Son. Help us as best we can, secure in your love and forgiveness, to live as your Son's disciples this day and every day. As a part of doing this, hear us now as we offer our prayers on behalf of others.

On TV we see the images of the huge forest fires in B.C., California, and Greece, and so we offer up our prayers for all those whose lives have been devastated by these disasters.

With the release of the latest U.N. report on climate change with all of its implications, we pray for the sake of your creation. Help us, individually and collectively, to care for what is ultimately your world, and to use it wisely. Indeed, grant that we may love the creation around us as you do.

As the pandemic continues, we pray for the well-being and safety of everyone, praying too for all in positions of authority that they may be guided to make good and wise decisions.

We pray for all whose lives have been devastated by the pandemic and especially for those who have lost loved ones or their livelihoods. We pray as well for relationships and friendships under stress or even ripped asunder because of differing views on vaccinating.

Remember Lord, your Church in these difficult times as she strives to minister in what is, in so many different ways, a changed landscape and world.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

