

## **“Beneficial Gifts”**

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask for or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

A few months ago, I was shopping at Zehrs when I noticed a display of Hot Wheels cars near the cash registers. This sight immediately brought me back to my childhood and the many hours I spent playing with model cars, both alone and with my friends. While Hot Wheels were very popular at the time, I was more attracted to Matchbox cars, the English toys that came in many sizes. My friends and I would collect these cars, play with them on some of the racetracks and other models that the company sold, and would at times trade cars for ones we liked better. It is possible that I still have some of these Matchbox cars in our basement, although I must admit it has been several years since I have played with them!

The sight of the Hot Wheels cars in the local market also reminded me of a time when we went to a flea market and came upon a vendor who was selling Matchbox cars. Once again, it brought me back to my childhood and wonderful memories of playing with my large collection, and I began to speak with the vendor about how important Matchbox cars were in my childhood. As we spoke, I noticed that to one side of his booth he had a locked display case with several Matchbox cars in their original boxes, with prices that far exceeded those that were displayed openly on the table. When I asked him about these cars, he explained that these were for collectors who keep the cars in their original boxes so that they might maintain their value as cars that are in “mint condition.” There is evidently a large market for such cars, and some people have collections of Matchbox cars in their original boxes that are worth thousands of dollars. When I thanked the vendor and moved on, I found myself feeling sad about these cars that have never been touched or played with by children. While I can understand the desire to maintain monetary value of collector’s items, it seemed to me that the purpose of these toys was lost if they were not used to bring enjoyment to this generation of children as they had brought me so much joy when I was a child. There was no benefit to these childhood toys if they were not used for their intended purpose.

It is common for people to treasure gifts that they have received and to care for them so that they can be enjoyed and passed on to others; but when gifts are not used for their intended purpose, they are not beneficial to the persons who receive them. Children who are tasked with clearing out their parents' home after their loved ones have died or moved into a long-term care facility often discover boxes of unopened gifts that are hidden away, never used for the purpose the giver intended. Collectors often have a large assortment of items kept away from human contact to preserve their "value," only to rob themselves of the value of enjoying these items in ways that can be of far greater value than mere monetary gain. A person can become so afraid of touching a toy, a gift, or a tool that they deny themselves the benefits that such a gift can offer to them. To borrow from a common axiom, if you do not use a gift in the way in was intended, you lose the benefits that gift can offer.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is teaching the Christians of that city and region what it means to be born anew to a living hope through baptism and what that new identity means for them as individuals and as a community of faith. The apostle opens his letter by praising God for our adoption as children of God, that *"in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us"* (1:7-8). Because in baptism we have been "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit," we are the recipients of Christ's *"pledge of our inheritance as God's own people, to the praise of his glory"* (1:13-14). Because we are now God's own people, former divisions that kept us separated from one another no longer have any impact or validity, for Christ Jesus *"is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us"* (2:14). Because of our unity as children of God who have been united with God and one another and made members of the church which is the Body of Christ, we are no longer *"strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."* (2:19-20). At the center of our life and faith is our identity as children of God who have been *"sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever"* (ELW Holy Baptism).

In today's second lesson from the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul offers a fervent prayer that God will bring God's good purposes to completion with the Christians of Ephesus and the province of Asia. His opening words, *"for this reason"* (3:14), pick up on an earlier theme in which Paul shares the reason why he is writing this letter, sharing *"the mystery [that] was made known to me by revelation ... a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ"* (3:3-4). Paul's prayer on behalf of his readers exemplifies that boldness and access to

God that has given him strength to face the challenges and opposition he has encountered throughout his apostolic ministry; *“this was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him”* (3:11-12).

Paul begins his prayer by stating that it is *“for this reason [that] I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name”* (3:14-15). The fact that Paul speaks of kneeling indicates a special intensity to his prayer in which he praises the Father (*pater*), from whom every family (*patria*) takes its name and receives its identity. Through the use of these two words that are similar in Paul’s language, the apostle emphasizes the unity of humankind under God:

- “That every *patria* receives its name from God simply means that God is the origin and head of every community in existence. This expression sums up what has been the chief argument of the first half of Ephesians, that in Christ Jews and Gentiles have been brought together to form one body, the church, which is the temple – the dwelling place – of God.” – Scott Shauf.

Paul goes on to pray that his readers may be strengthened by the action of the Holy Spirit: *“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, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, and you are being rooted and grounded in love”* (3:16-17). The place where this strengthening occurs is the “inner self,” where we need God’s power the most to make choices to love God and face the pressures of the world, the devil, and our own fallen nature, pressures of which Paul speaks in his other letters:

- “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” – Romans 8:10.
- “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test!” – 2 Corinthians 13:5.
- “To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” – Colossians 1:27.

Paul’s prayer that *“Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith”* refers to the core of the whole person, the deepest part of a human being where a person thinks, feels, and chooses; it is at the heart of each person that Paul prays for them to be *“rooted and grounded in love,”* which designates God’s mercy and goodness toward the

elect. This love (*agape*) is the bedrock on which we are built and the soil in which God's people are planted; *"God's love for us is the basis for our love for him and for others and is the reason Paul can make the requests that follow"* (Peter S. Williamson). God's love for the faithful is the same love that those who bear the name of Christ are to share with others: *"We love because he first loved us."* (1 John 4:19).

Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians may be given the power to comprehend, along with all the saints, *"what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge"* (3:18). Understanding and knowing are the objects of strengthening (*"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him"* (1:17). These petitions ask that God endow believers with the wisdom needed to hold fast to the gift of salvation. It is the mystery of God's plan that reflects the Lord's infinite wisdom, which in turn manifests Christ's infinite love revealed in the Cross. It is the Cross of Christ that stands as the irrefutable proof of a love that can never fail and from which we can never be separated:

- "No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 8:37-39.

Paul prays according to God's will that Christians be so strengthened by the Spirit, so inhabited by Christ, so personally acquainted with the love, wisdom, and plan of God revealed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection that they *"may be filled with all the fullness of God"* (3:19). The church is the "fullness of Christ," who in turn fills the entire cosmos. God's preordained plan, which culminates in Christ, is the object of praise. Being filled with "all the fullness of God" means that the church is entrusted with the gifts of grace that it is meant to share with others; as he taught the Corinthians in his second letter, *"we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us"* (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul likens his readers to containers which have been filled with God's divine life and love in the measure of God's own fullness:

- "Paul prays according to God's will that we Christians be so strengthened by the Spirit, so inhabited by Christ, so personally acquainted with the love, wisdom, and plan of God revealed in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that we would be transformed, becoming containers as full of God as God's fullness." – Williamson.

It is through our faithful stewardship of the grace that has been entrusted to us to bear to others and the gifts that we are called to use for the benefit of all people that we will experience what Paul describes as *“the power at work within us [that] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask for or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”* (3:20-21). This is the only doxology in the New Testament that mentions Christ and the church as the locus of praise. The doxology celebrates the power of God to deliver even more than humans might ask for or imagine; it retrieves the description of the great power of God that raised Christ and is at work in believers (*“... the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places ...”* – 1:19-20). It also models the praise of God’s glory for which the elect were predestined, *“so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory”* (1:12). Paul emphasizes that believers received the grace and Spirit of God long before they came to ask God for them. Such confidence is part of the access to God that Christians enjoy. The prayer asks God to bring to perfection the work of salvation that has already begun among the elect; *“what that will mean in the concrete terms of Christian life remains to be spelled out in the second half of the letter.”* (Pheme Perkins). The church gives glory to God because it is the community of those who have received God’s grace and who return thanks and praise and honour to God.

- “The Holy Spirit teaches us the knowledge of Christ. The Spirit pours Christ into the heart, setting it all on fire with love and making it steadfast through faith in him. Where he dwells, there is fullness of life, whether the soul is weak or strong.” – Martin Luther, 1525.

Being the community that has been *“filled with all the fullness of God”* means that the Church of Jesus Christ has been entrusted with the gifts of God’s Word and called to be bearers of God’s grace to the world in which it is called to live and serve. Paul describes the Church in other letters as the Body of Christ in which all members are endowed with gifts that are only beneficial if they are used for the purposes that God intended. In 1 Corinthians, Paul teaches his readers that *“there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). To his audience in Rome, the apostle teaches that *“as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of*

*another*” (Romans 12:4-5). Having been incorporated through baptism into a “house of living stones” with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, the first letter of Peter reminds us that “*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). The Church of Jesus Christ is the community that has been called by Christ, gathered through baptism into a community rooted in Word and Sacrament, and entrusted to be the vessels that will bear the liberating word of God to all the world. The gifts that have been bestowed upon God’s people are gifts that are only beneficial if they are used for the purposes that our Lord wills, for “*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word*” (ELW Hymn 729).

- “Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for its existence ... it is ‘sent out’ (that is what the word *apostolic* means), usually against its will, by the God who called it into being, because of love for the world ... the mission of the church is of central importance to Christian faith, so much so that it constitutes the most basic reason why the church must exist.” – Douglas John Hall.

As Matchbox cars are not meant to remain sealed in their boxes but to be taken out so that they might bring joy to children, so we must not hide our gifts away or neglect to use them for the purposes of the Lord who entrusted them to us. We must not hide the light of Christ under a bushel where it does no good; as people who have been born anew to a living hope through out baptism into Christ, let us always shine our light before others – use the gifts that God has entrusted to us so that they might be beneficial – so that others may “*see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:16).

Amen.