

Epiphany 4, Year B
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The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
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Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Psalm 111 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-28

Hallelujah!

*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, *
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.*

Thanks be to God! On this day, the fourth Sunday of Epiphany, we join the psalmist with words of thanks –giving, with our whole heart. Can we give our whole, corporate heart to God, with thanks? Unreservedly, I say, of course! A few weeks ago we promised to help Evan grow in the stature of Christ. We said we’d do that, help with his growth, with our prayers and witness. Next week we will be asked to make that same commitment to William and Thomas. We will also be asked to help Sarah and Cooper grow in their lives in Christ. We vow to do “all in our power” to help them grow. In contrast to committing to prayer, witness, and action that requires “all in our power,” giving thanks to God from the body of the congregation doesn’t sound that bad. Awkward, maybe, if we stood up and yelled for healing like the man with the demon did, but not all that hard. Jesus healed *him* with words, so maybe he can help me, too. We will give thanks, with God’s help.

On a day that includes our annual meeting, it might seem a little odd to be hearing about being thankful. Aren’t we supposed to be talking about money? That’s the easy part – to bury ourselves in spread sheets and details, even to get a little lost in those numbers ... but even there, we give thanks.

Our cultural environment finds a strange certainty in highlighting the latest reports about church attendance being on a steep slope of decline, of decreasing financial and volunteer giving, and the wish/want/need for young adults and children to grow into leadership for the next generation of the church, and to fill our pews now. We could drown in reports of calamity, but as Jonah discovered so long ago, a deep sea will not hinder God’s work and God’s grace. Our many ways of rebelling will not overshadow God’s mercy when we turn to God and say “we will” again and again. By grace, I mean God pouring abundance over us, giving us living water when we need it the most. By mercy, I point to the many times we do not “get what we deserve;” instead, we receive God’s grace.

Our desire for certainty, even a precarious one, is not what governs God. One of our biggest challenges may be living with uncertainty and putting our whole trust in God’s grace and love. That’s faith! We do not have to subscribe or succumb to the dire predictions of the world. We are a faithful community “on the way” of Jesus. We are a sacramental community, and that includes worship, buildings, employees, stipends, benefits ... and many more spiritual things. Our foundation is Jesus Christ. Our first commandment and commitment is to love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. And to love our neighbor. All of the financial “stuff” has to do with the way that we function in the world, and we do function in a very real world. How do we love God with all of ourselves so that we can love our neighbors more and more? It may take “all in our power” to respond to the voice God and not to the 24/7 news.

The vestry practiced using the phrase “so that” while we were in retreat last weekend. Author Lovett H. Weems, Jr. writes that “churches often invest a great deal of energy in activities without ever asking how they relate to what God is calling the church to accomplish.” Asking “so that,” he says, can help us focus on God. To me, “so that” connects the “of the world” action to our commitment to loving God and sharing the gospel. Here’s how it works:

We will have Vacation Bible School again this summer. (We really will.) Why?

We will have Vacation Bible School this summer *so that* what?

We will have Vacation Bible School this summer so that our children, the children of Pleasant Valley Connection, and many others, can know God in new (fun) ways. I would add: so that we can express our love of God through God’s beloved, lively children. I encourage us in the months ahead to practice using the “so that” phrase so that all that we do (or more, or most) of what we do focuses on the purpose of our functions and ministries. And our purpose is?

Today we give thanks because Jesus, the light of the world, is with us. We give thanks for the many ways in which members and friends of Redeemer shine Christ’s light into the world. It is the light of Christ that the world desperately needs to see. We give thanks that God changes *us* so that we might carry that light and love God and our neighbor with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

Together, we say: “We will, with God’s help.”