

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank you on this day for all these things we are not mindful. We recognize that we are each called toward your goodness in ways we don't always realize. You have come to give us vast abundance, and we only see where we define ourselves as falling short. We see what we don't have in tangible goods when you have given us large families and warm houses. We see what our bank accounts lack when you have bestowed laughter, friendship, and love overflowing. We see where we lack prestige and titles when you have given us the basics we need to serve you fully. Gracious God, in a world that defines abundance so narrowly, may we see where you are calling us toward the fullness of abundance as you define it. We recognize this goodness as we turn our hearts and minds to you in prayer. Make our eyes see with your vision; may our hearts love with your love. Transform our willing selves into something more Christ like as we lift our prayers to you.

Holy Loving God, this day we are mindful of our calling to be loving, to be caring, to address the wounds of our world with the power of the Gospel calling. We pray to see the world and address the world through the eyes of plenty, when all too often we subscribe to the world's fearfulness of scarcity. We pray for the wisdom to share all that you have lovingly given; we long for the wisdom to not consider ourselves the exclusive receivers of your gifts but the conduit to fill other that you may be glorified in the giving. You have blessed us; we wish to bless others. We pray all these things in the name of the one who gives himself to all, the Lord Jesus Christ, as we pray together around the world...

SERMON

I grew up watching the TV show M*A*S*H, and I'm sure you have seen it along the way. One of my favorite episodes is called "The Incubator," because it's all about Hawkeye

and Trapper's mission to get an incubator for their Unit. After all, they have a patient with a horrible, out-of-control infection, and without an incubator, they need to wait a couple of days to find out what's ailing him. They call up the Quartermaster, the Lord of all things tangible in the Army, who says they can't have one. It would be a "luxury" for a M*A*S*H unit to have an incubator...but they can have a pizza oven. Then Radar locates three unused incubators at an Evac Hospital, and Hawkeye and Trapper rush to go get one. There they encounter a Major who is a really bad hoarder. Why can't they have one of their incubators? "One might break then I might only have two," he says. They then go up a level to the commanding officer, a corrupt Colonel, to find that he will give them the incubator for a nice little sum of money. Finding this just as unacceptable, they go up a level to a General, posing as reporters, and asking why M*A*S*H units can't have incubators. The clueless General answers with an off-hand remark, and then our two heroes get into big trouble when they push back. "Give me an incubator or give me death!" Hawkeye yells at the General. They return home seemingly defeated only to find that the clever Radar has gotten them an incubator by a little horse-trading of the commanding officer's new grill.

There's something about that story that really gets us, about how something that is truly needed is held captive by someone who, well, just wants more. This week, we hear a very similar story by Jesus' hometown, the second part of a two part story. So, last week, we heard the thesis, the dramatic overview, the content of the Gospel message as Jesus read from Isaiah. "This has been fulfilled in your hearing," capped it all off with a bang. And now, we get the response from the congregation hearing this new word. At first, it seems benevolent and wondrous, but Jesus responds to their wonder with harshness not because they are rude to him but because, under the surface, they miss the point. They

have a deeper agenda, and it goes against the word of Christ. What Jesus sees, and what we must see too, is just like our friends Trapper and Hawkeye: there is a big problem here with trying to hoard when something necessary like the incubator in M*A*S*H, or Christ's blessings, must be available to all.

We heard the words of Christ, now we get the response of the congregation hearing his words. The first response shows where this group is going. "Is this not Joseph's Son?" It sounds like a compliment, a way of saying, "Wow, look how far he has come! We are proud of him!" But their intentions are not as kind as they seem. What is actually happening, according to the New Interpreter's commentary, is that they are calling him their own when he, in fact, is not really Joseph's son. They are putting limits on him when he is limitless. They are making him out to be something that he is not for their own gain. After all, he is Jesus Christ, Son of God. They are, by making him theirs and theirs alone, the rightful receivers of his blessings. "Do for us what you did in Capernaum!" is what Jesus knows they will say next. Jesus senses this inclination and responds using biblical examples of true faithfulness. He lists off the names of prophets and heroes of the bible who were called outside of God's Chosen People, the nation of Israel, but by their faithfulness and their honest searching, they were rewarded with grace. Naaman was a Syrian, among that group that destroyed the nation of Israel, but his faithfulness and openness toward God's prophet allowed him to be healed. Elijah is called to the woman at Zarephath, outside the nation of Israel, to be fed and to heal a sick son. What all these have in common is openness to how the Spirit and blessings of God work, and they aren't the insiders. They came willingly and lovingly, not assuming they would or would not get what they wished, but allowed God to work. The people here do not, and you can see the results.

They try to take him out of town and push him off a cliff. Jesus merely passes through them and goes on his way.

I'm grateful that we have not yet tried to take me out of the city and toss me off a cliff. But when we really get down to it, what we have here is a classic dichotomy, the issues between abundance and scarcity. Hawkeye and Trapper saw abundance with three incubators; the greedy supply Major saw scarcity; "if you take one, I'll only have two!" The congregation sees God's blessings as something they have a corner on; their mentality is essentially "give us and us alone your blessings!" They make the blessings about them and their right to them. They obviously deserve them more because they are the home of Jesus, and Jesus is ever-expanding his influence. Essentially, they are making the ministry of Jesus about them and trying to hoard what he has. There's actually a TV show called "Hoarders" and it puts them in quite the negative light. After all, they keep and keep to the detriment of everything else they have. It's about "more" at the expense of what is already had. We have what we need, and we help provide for God's children outside the walls.

It really annoys me these days, those who bind God's grace and God's blessing within one particular group. I saw a great comic the other day, showing a bunch of Christians looking at a great huge map of denominational history, how denominations broke away from others and so forth. The guy up front points at the smallest part of the map and exclaims with pride: "Here! After two thousand plus years, we are the ones who finally got it right!" It seems comical, but unfortunately, it's a real attitude we face today. God's blessing is mine and mine alone; when that is challenged, what comes up? Anger, violence, everything we know is not of God. It's more about them than it is about God.

A couple weeks ago, our group in bible study asked the question, "What is blessing?" and how the bible answers that question. The short answer is that the bible defines blessing in many ways, but one thing is certain when it comes to the Christian calling and the gifts of God: they are never ends in themselves. If blessings are an end in themselves, then our calling is to hoard as much as we can, never giving anything, because it would mean we are giving away God's favor. But we know that's not right. Reflecting on blessing is not an opportunity for us to sit around and be thankful. Instead, blessings are a means to an end; in other words, they are the ways and means God has entrusted to us to go out and serve God's people.

I'll try to put it in a different way. This last week, I was approved by my Board of Ordained Ministry reading team toward ordination. That leaves two last hurdles for my ordination, those being approval by the full Board of Ordained Ministry and the Clergy Session, the meeting of all the clergy at Annual Conference. I'll be honest, this is a big deal; ordination is the first major career goal for any pastor. It's a celebration of the calling that God has given to each pastor. If and when I am ordained (God willing), I have two ways in which I can react. The first is like the way this congregation viewed its blessings. I could run up on the stage at the ordination ceremony blowing kisses, bowing, and altogether making the ceremony about me. "Look how richly God has blessed me!" I can act, and make it, well, literally all about me. I can make that the finish line of ministry and celebrate all I have done and how God pleasingly looks on me. Or I can react a different way. I can use that time to deeply and calmly reflect on the grand calling before me, standing among my peers as one in a much bigger picture. It's scarcity vs. abundance once again. God's grace, God's goodness always comes to us as abundance, whereas we can easily perceive scarcity.

If I make the whole thing about me, then I miss a lot, and other people are shut down at the same time.

Jesus Christ came for the redemption of the whole world, and to focus on the singular is to forget that great message. If I were to celebrate ordination as my work well done, I forget that I have had a great community around me for decades, frankly, who have nurtured me by the power of God. I forget that my ordination as an Elder in the United Methodist Church really does not make me more important than anyone else, for we each have our own unique ordinations. My wife has been ordained by God to be the best Clinical Pharmacist that she can be right now. Each of us in this room have ways in which we have been ordained toward our own unique callings in big or small ways, and we are all, individually and as a community, ordained to be ministers of God's Word as laypeople. God's calling, God's direction, God's love, God's blessings are so much bigger than all of us realize, and so is the way that God works in our lives. In other words, I tell others that I need all my extra incubators when others really need them. When you sit back and look at the way God has moved us and so many more beyond our knowledge, we cannot help but be humbled. It is not for us to own but for us to admire.

So, whether you're Hawkeye Pierce and Trapper John, preparing for ordination, or just occupying the pews, we have a choice in this world, and it looks like how this group in Nazareth. How do we respond when the doors are not flung open to include the masses who seek the Lord Christ? Is he just for us or is he for all? How we answer will define who we are as God's people. We will either be welcoming the Christ in our midst or we will be metaphorically taking him out of town and trying to toss him off a cliff. God's Gospel

message and grace is a gift; it is for us and it is for them and it is for all who come in the name of the Christ. Thanks be to God for this great gift for us and for all! Amen and Amen.