The St. Andrew's Pulpit

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July 1, 2012 – Sunday of Easter

**The Riches of Life in Christ**

**Part One of A Sermon Series on the Letter to the Ephesians**

*“I pray that…* *you may come to know:*

*- the hope to which God has called you,
- the riches of the spectacular inheritance God is offering His people, and
- the vast resources of power available for us who trust in God.”*

- Ephesians 1:1-2,15-23

Over our years together, Therese and I have moved a number of times, most recently just a year and a half ago, Each time we spend a couple of months sorting through our possessions, deciding what we should keep and what we would dispose of, what we no longer need and what we cannot bear to part with. And then we box up what we want to keep, so that it can easily and safely be carried out the front door of our old house, loaded into a UHaul, stock trailer, or moving van, driven to the new house, unloaded, carried in the front door and then unboxed in an appropriate location.

And then we start with the unpacking. That takes longer than the packing, and in some cases goes on for years. But throughout this whole process, I keep wondering: where did we get all this stuff? When I was single, my stuff fit in a hatchback. When Therese and I were newly married, our stuff, including all our wedding presents, half-filled a smallish U-Haul truck. Somehow between two jobs, two kids, a dog a cat, living in a house with a double car garage and a full basement for twenty-three years, we managed to accumulate a lot of stuff. How the heck did that happen?

Every time we move, in the midst of all the packing and unpacking, lifting and loading and carting and carrying, there is a word which keeps coming to mind: the word is cumber, from which we get our word encumbrance. Cumber refers to something that encumbers, hinders, constrains us. Being weighed down by cumber is like being trapped in a collapsed building, weighed down so that we aren’t free to move. We are encumbered by many things, most of them not at all material, many of them spiritual.

Which brings me to the apostle Paul and the letter to the Ephesians. Paul lived a nomadic life, with very little cumber. After his call to become the apostle to the Gentiles he travelled all over what is now Turkey and Greece, teaching a message about how we can live a life liberated, unencumbered by oppressive powers. One of those cities in which Paul spent a couple of years was the port city of Ephesus on the western coast of Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. Later, he or someone writing in his name wrote a letter to the Christians in Ephesus which made it into the New Testament.

Recently, a friend of mine, whose opinion I respect, told me that he thought that Ephesians was a crucial letter for the United Church at this time. And when I noticed that there is a series of readings from Ephesians in the lectionary for this summer, I decided to ignore the other readings for this summer and preach a series of sermons on this book. I chose the first reading for the series, chose the hymns, prepared the bulletin, and then thought, OK, how am I going to preach this? I have always found Paul’s letters difficult to preach on. Most of them were written to address very specific situations, which often have little to do with our current settings. He uses long sentences with lots of subordinate clauses. To put it mildly, he takes a little unpacking. And long explanations strike me as a bit tedious. Like my stuff, the language and argument of Paul contains a lot of cumber.

So rather than try and explain this passage, I thought I would tell a story, an imaginative recreation of how someone in Ephesus might have heard this letter. So here goes:

Crixus was irritated, in more ways than one. There was a man, Demetrius, that he didn’t like. Couldn’t stand him actually, and today, Demetrius had pushed right past him and stopped in front. Crixus ended up pressed right up to Demetrius in the crowded room. He couldn’t stand the cloying cologne the man wore, and today the stench was making him gag. Even worse than the cologne, Demetrius was a snob, a scribe in the household of one of the great families of Ephesus. And to him Crixus was nobody, beneath notice: first, Crixus was a slave; second, he could neither read or write; third, he belonged to a minor household; fourth, the family he belonged to was Jewish. All of which seemed to Demetrius good reason to pay Crixus no attention, none at all. Crixus was pretty sure Demetrius had not even bothered to learn his name.

Crixus was used to disrespect. As a slave, he received little. He was kindly treated by his masters, much better treated than most of the other slaves he knew. That was one of the good things about Jews. They had this story they told every year about being slaves themselves once, so it was part of their religion to treat slaves well. There were a lot of other good things about Jews, which was why Crixus hadn’t mind accompanying them to synagogue. He grew to love singing the psalms and listening to the teachings about a God who heard the cries of slaves and longed for justice and freedom. Knowing that the Lord of the universe cared about such things made Crixus feel less like a slave, and more like a person. And then, when the teacher Paul had shown up with his message about Jesus the crucified Messiah, and how in him there was neither nor slave nor free, nor Jew nor Greek, he had been one of the first to be baptized.

At first, Paul and his followers had been welcome in the synagogue, and Paul took his turn speaking regularly, but not all the Jews liked his teachings, and they started agitating for him to be silenced. The disagreement came to a head about three months after his arrival, and Paul and the followers of the Jesus Way reluctantly found themselves needing to meet on their own.

But as time went on, Crixus grew to love the church even more than he had the synagogue. In the synagogue, he had always been an outsider, because he was a non-Jew, a Gentile. They called him and the other gentiles who attended synagogue “god-fearers.” There were lots of god-fearers who attended the synagogue. Like Crixus, most of the other god-fearers had responded eagerly to Paul’s message and been baptized, and when the fight happened, they had left with him to found the church.

And Crixus loved the church. He had helped paint a mural of the garden of Eden in the room in which they met, because he and many others thought of the church as a return to that paradise. It wasn’t perfect, not with people like Demetrius in it, but it was a loving community in which people looked after each other. If they were hungry, they were fed. If they were sick, they were cared for. They served a God of love whose deepest desire was that they would love each other. Compared to the world they lived in, it was a paradise.

And that was why people like Demetrius kept joining. Ephesus could be a brutal place, but of the Christians, people said, “have you noticed how they love each other?” Some mocked it, some were bewildered by it, and many were attracted to it. If not paradise, it was as close as any of them would ever get.

That had been years before, and Paul had been gone a long time, turning over the leadership of the church to those, like Crixus, who had been Christians for the longest. Crixus had gained a kind of status in the church he had never had outside it. Although outside the church, he was a slave in a minor household, within the church community he was an elder, and although he was not an educated man, on those rare occasions when he spoke, always tentative, always humble, people listened to him with respect.

Demetrius was new to the congregation and had not yet fully learned that the outside distinctions didn’t matter here. And so that day when he had arrogantly shoved his way to the front, Crixus was irritated, irritated by the smell, and irritated by the disrespect.

There was a lot of excitement in the room that day, because a visitor had arrived, bringing news from Paul, and even more exciting, a letter. It had been years since Paul had left, and many of those present had never met him in person, but they had all heard of him and the role he had played in the start of their community. And so Crixus took a deep breath and tried to set aside his irritation and prepare to listen carefully.

After the opening psalms and hymns, the presider that day introduced the visitor, a man named Tychicus. Tychicus spoke, bringing greetings from Paul and other apostles, and the elders of other churches in Collosae, Laodecia and other places. Paul had been imprisoned for his teaching, he explained, and had been unable to write each church personally, but had asked Tychicus to write in his name to the Christians in Ephesus, using the letter to the Colossians as a template, and then deliver the letter personally.

And then Tychicus read. It was an impressive letter, written with great learning, full of references to the other religions common in Ephesus, and to the philosophical debates between the atheists and the Stoics. It reminded Crixus of the way Paul used to talk, but was subtly different, perhaps because of Tychicus’ role in its composition. Tychicus read of God’s plan to include Jews and Gentiles in one community, of forgiveness and freedom and a glorious inheritance of faith. He read of Paul’s prayers, hopes and dreams for the Ephesians, prayers that they might continue to grow in faith and maturity, to be able to see with enlightened hearts something of the hope and riches and power of faith in Christ. And he read of Paul’s gratitude for their faith and their love toward all the saints.

And then, suddenly, Crixus realized that it was not just the newcomers like Demetrius who had to grow in faith and maturity. For in his own attitude toward Demetrius, he had been immature, reacting like a resentful slave rather than like the free man he had become in Christ. Pressed up against Demetrius’ back, he felt the encumbrance of his resentment toward the man fall away. And then, almost without his conscious decision, his arm lifted, and his hand found Demetrius’ shoulder. Demetrius glanced at him in surprise, and Crixus felt him shudder, almost in revulsion, but he did not protest, and slowly, slowly the muscles in his shoulders relaxed, and he silently accepted the gesture of friendship. And so they stood there, together, listening, brothers in faith, the slave and the scribe.

Above them, on the wall, was the mural Crixus had helped paint, the mural of the paradise of the garden of Eden, the paradise which had just come to life again, in a small way, as the two men claimed anew the riches of life in Christ.