The St. Andrew's Pulpit

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**United by Grace**

***Sermon Series on Ephesians, Part 2***

*Christ came to announce peace to you who were distant from God and peace to those who were near to God.*

*For through Christ we have equal access to the Father through one Spirit. –* **Ephesians 2:4-22**

Last week, I started a series on one of the jewels of the New Testament, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Ephesus is an ancient city on the Western coast of Turkey. If you visited the site of ancient Ephesus today, you will see visit the ancient theatre, which seated 25,000 people, or the Library of Celsus. Those ruins demonstrate that this was once an important cultural centre, where people engaged many different ideas. It was also a port, and so there was a vibrant mix of cultures and faith traditions from which to choose and which often came into contact. Among others, it was home to a Jewish community, and according to the book of Acts, Paul first began his ministry among the Gentile “God-fearers” who were attracted to the high moral standards of the Jewish god. Many of the ancient Greek and Roman religions were magical in nature. Through various sacrifices and incantations you tried to get the gods to do what you want. You tried to manipulate the gods to do your will, but your will is still at the center. In that, the ancient pagans were very similar to many people today who approach religion, community, even family like consumers. Everything is disposable if it doesn’t meet what they perceive to be their needs.

The Jewish and Christian God is different. Both Christian and Jewish faith share the conviction that religious practice isn’t about trying to get what you want from God. It is about learning what God wants, and adapting our wills to God’s will. Our personal desires are less important than social justice, compassion, mercy and generosity. Difficult as it is to achieve in practice, that simple idea, which many of us take for granted, was very different from the basic mindset of the religious consumer, ancient or modern. And for people exhausted by a competitive culture in which everyone is out for themselves, the news that salvation, life in its fullness, comes when we let God be God, and seek to serve God and our neighbours, is actually pretty good news.

Last week, as a way of exploring the letter to the Ephesians, I used the ancient Jewish practice of Midrash, a story, imaginatively retelling what one of the first Christians in Ephesus might have experienced in hearing this letter for the first time. I introduced you to Crixus, a slave who became one of the first Christians in Ephesus, and an elder in the local church. I told you how, in response to the letter, he reached out in friendship to a man who despised him, a man I gave the name of Demetrius.

Today, I thought you might like to hear a little more about the story of Demetrius:

It was hot that day, not just from the weather, but from the press of too many people in too little space. Many of them were slaves and laborers, and Demetrius didn’t want to think about the last time they had bathed. No matter how much fragrant oil Demetrius doused himself with before he came, he could not mask the odour of several dozen people in a confined warm space.

Every time he came in the door, he asked himself why he bothered. What could these dirty, smelly ignorant people, whom he would previously have never bothered to acknowledge, have to offer him? He was a scribe in one of the great houses of Ephesus. Born into a poor family, he had worked hard to learn to read and keep accounts. When he was offered a position as scribe, he left home and never looked back. Over time, he had worked his way up to become the chief of staff of one of the wealthiest families in the world. Although he had never married – his position gave him no time for his own family – he was an important person, an educated man, a person of taste and refinement and culture.

And until three months previously, he had been satisfied with that. But then he had fallen ill, seriously ill. For three weeks, he had suffered with fever, shaking, horrible joint pain, unable to leave his bed.

His memories of that time were fragmented. In his fever, he had drifted in and out of consciousness, but he had some memories, and in all of them, he thought he was going to die. His master must have thought the same thing. The master and mistress came to visit just once, early on, even though his room was in the same part of the house as their own. They brought a doctor, who apparently could do nothing. They stood in the doorway, looked on him lying there, keeping their distance as best they could, and talked about him as if he wasn’t there. He was so feverish they must have thought that he couldn’t hear or understand, but he did hear, he did understand, and he did not forget.

“What will we do if he dies?” the mistress asked. “We will replace him,” the master answered curtly, “It won’t be hard. There are many hungry scribes in the city.” And then they left, shutting the door behind them. After that for several days his memories were all of being in the room alone - no visitors. Twice a day, one of the slaves brought him a glass of water and a bowl of porridge and got just close enough to put the water within his reach, and then scampered back out of the room.

Demetrius knew why. They were afraid. His illness was a curse from the gods. Everyone knew that. That was what illness was. And they were afraid that if they got too close, showed him kindness, the gods would curse them too. Demetrius understood their fear. He had avoided sick people too, lest the gods curse him along with them. And so there he was, too weak to move, his bed soiled with his diarrhea and piss, and those he had served loyally for twenty-nine years were waiting for him to die. He was alone, and he was afraid. And for several days, his reality was his small room, his bed, a sip of water, a spoonful of gruel, the pitch dark of night, the light of day, fear, and, worst of all, a desperate, aching loneliness.

And then, suddenly, his memories changed. He was no longer alone. He drifted back into consciousness in his fevered state at night, and a candle was burning. Someone was there, a spirit he thought at first, a young man in a simple tunic. The young man was wiping his brow with a cool cloth, singing under his breath some simple melody. He had been washed and his bedclothes changed. In the corner was a cot that had not been there before. He slept again, more peacefully in the presence of another.

The next time he woke, it was daytime and the young man was gone, but an old woman was there, washing his fevered body beneath a clean sheet, singing softly. He slept and woke again; it was night, and the young man was back, and through his fever, Demetrius recognized him: the young man was a slave in the house, one of his employees, although he could not remember the name. During the day, the young man went to his work, and others came, different each day, but in the evening it was always the young man who came and looked after the sick Demetrius, bathing him, cooling his fever with damp clothes, changing his sheets, cleaning his soil, and napping on the cot in the corner.

It was several more days before the fever broke, and another week after that before he was well enough to get out of bed. And during that time, the young man was there, every minute he was not working. Even when he was working, Demetrius was never alone. There were a steady stream of visitors, none of whom he had ever met before, sitting by his bed, singing their simple songs.

Demetrius had a lot of time to think while he lay there. He thought about life and death, about what he had lived for and why he had been spared. He thought hard, resentful thoughts about the family he had served, but who had left him alone there to die. But most of all, he thought about the young slave and his helpers who had tended him so faithfully, who had saved his life.

As his strength returned, he began asking questions. It turned out that the young slave, whose name was Petros, had gone to the master and been given permission to tend the sick Demetrius. And it was he who had arranged for all the others to come during the day when he had other duties. They were his family, he said, although he was a slave and had no family beyond the house he belonged to. As Demetrius regained his strength, they began to talk long into the night, and he learned a lot about Petros. He had belonged to the house for four years. His father had gotten into debt and been forced to sell him into slavery. He had not seen his father, mother or sisters since. The name Petros puzzled Demetrius. The slave’s accent was Ephesian, but Petros was a Greek name. Petros smiled at that and explained that he had taken a new name when he was baptized. “Baptized?” inquired Demetrius.

And at that Petros had told him about the Way of Jesus, and about the God of the Jews who was really the God of everyone. This was not a god who cursed people with illness, Petros said, but a God of compassion, whose presence is revealed in the suffering of his Son. That was why Petros had come and nursed him back to health, he said, because he believed that God was present in the neighbor in need.

Demetrius was a skeptical man, and not given to new fads. He was grateful to Petros, but the idea of suffering as a sign of God’s presence, rather than absence, the idea of their hero as a man who had been crucified was so strange that at first he thought he was still feverish when he heard it. So he asked Petros to explain it again, and again. And each time he heard it, it was like he caught a glimpse of a different reality, like looking through a key hole into a different room, a different world.

When he asked how he could thank the others who had helped him, and Petros invited him to come to the gathering of the Way, he could not say no. And so he had gone, and the first time he had entered the small house where they gathered, he saw person after person who had sat by his side during his illness, and each of them greeted him warmly and expressed their delight that he was so well recovered. And when they had sung together, he had recognized many of the simple tunes that had been sung by his bedside.

As Demetrius regained his strength, and went back to work, the master and mistress treated him as if nothing had changed, but something had changed. They might be the wealthiest family in Ephesus, but he no longer admired them as he once had. His life no longer revolved around theirs the way it once had. His identity was not tied up with theirs the way it had been before.

And then, he found himself in that hot, crowded room, his nose assaulted by the smells of the unwashed slaves and labourers with whom he found himself. He was listening to a visitor read a letter from someone reputed to be important in this fledgling movement. One of the slaves had the effrontery to put his hand on Demetrius’ shoulder, and at first Demetrius drew back in revulsion. And then he heard words that so caught his attention that he forgot all about the offending hand and the offensive odors: “we were living lives deadened by sin, he brought us to life with Christ – by his generosity we have been raised up to fullness of life with Christ.”

That was him, he realized, not just in his physical illness, so close to death, but in the whole way of life he had been living, thinking of himself as so much better than these simple people only because of his education and the family he served, devoting his life to a family who cared for him so little that whether he lived or died made no difference, no difference at all.

At that moment he realized that these people, slaves and nobodies though most of them were, had more than he had ever had. They had generosity, kindness, and joy. They had a fullness of life which he had never known. And more than anything, they had a sense that their lives were connected to this God of theirs, who they said loved them enough to die for them. And they had a sense that they were connected to each other, too, in a way that Demetrius did not fully grasp. It was an connection, a bond of neither blood nor patronage. He asked Petros about it, and Petros merely nodded, smiled and said “We call it *pneuma.” Pneuma*: the Greek word for breath, for wind and for spirit. At first the bond seemed little more than breath and wind to Demetrius, but he gradually came to realize it was something real, and powerful, and he didn’t want to live without it. Demetrius remained a skeptical man, but he could not deny that this group of people, whom he had never met before, had loved him more than anyone he had ever known. They had something he wanted. And what he wanted was to love them back.