

Pentecost IV, 2009
On the Occasion of the 2009 Texas District Convention
“Reaching – Receiving – Refreshing”

Text: Philemon 3-7.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Receiving the Word; Reaching others; and Refreshing the saints. That is what we are about as the people of God. The life that comes from union with Christ in our Baptism is what continues to nourish and strengthen us throughout our days as God’s dear children. This divine life is the treasure we possess in jars of clay (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7) not to hoard, but to give away. For it is this life alone that lightens the darkness of all people (cf. Jn. 1:4-5).

In our text, St. Paul is writing to his brother in Christ, Philemon. It begins with Paul blessing Philemon with the grace and peace of Christ and letting him know how thankful he is to God when he remembers Philemon in prayer.

Why is Paul so thankful? He gives two reasons: First, that Philemon is a man filled with faith toward Jesus Christ. Next, that Philemon loves the people of God.

Then Paul shares with Philemon the content of his requests to God on Philemon’s behalf. “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective...” (v. 6.) He prays that Philemon will be an effective witness for Christ to those who do not yet believe. How can Paul’s prayer be answered? How can Philemon increase his effectiveness as a witness for the risen Jesus? By coming to a full knowledge of every good thing that is in him because of who Jesus is and what he has done.

There is a connection between our understanding of the Gospel in our own lives and both our willingness and our effectiveness in sharing it with others.

If I tell you that you really should drive a Honda Accord because Honda has a reputation for affordability, reliability, and fuel efficiency, but I myself drive a Chevrolet, what is the likelihood that you will go and test-drive a Honda? It is not very likely, is it?

On the other hand, picture me sitting behind the wheel of the third Honda Accord I’ve owned since 1982, and then I tell you that the others have served me so well I passed them on to two of my children, and that over the years I have saved thousands of dollars on both fuel and repairs by driving these cars, and then I ask you if you’d like to get in and take it for a spin yourself.

Now, which would you find more persuasive? The one in which I simply recommended the car based on its reputation, or the one in which I speak from years of personal experience in driving the car?

The second is more convincing, isn't it? Why? Because it rings true. An authenticity is lent my recommendation when it comes from my heart rather than my head.

It is the same way with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the last chapter of Matthew is the passage we know as the Great Commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (cf. Matt. 28:19). From this passage, we conclude that Jesus expects us—as those who are already his disciples—to be about the task of telling others about him so that they too might become his disciples.

Too often, though we receive exhortations to share our Christian faith as if it were nothing but a duty to be performed. Sort of like a requirement of a multi-level marketing scheme. Then, if we undertake the task at all, we undertake it with a dutiful dryness. "Hi. I'm from the Lutheran Church down the way, and I'm supposed to tell you about Jesus. He died on the cross for your sins. You should really come to Church and learn more about him." I don't know about you, but if someone said that to me, I would probably say, "No thanks" and shut the door.

In the third *Godfather* movie, Cardinal Lamberto is speaking with Michael Corleone and picks up a stone out of a fountain. Listen to what he says next:

Look at this stone. It has been in the water for a very long time, but the water has not penetrated it. Look... [he breaks the stone open] Perfectly dry. The same thing has happened to men in Europe. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity, but Christ has not penetrated. Christ doesn't live within them.

Could it be that the same thing has happened to many of the men and women and young people in our churches? For generations, we have been surrounded by the pure Gospel in both Word and Sacraments as well as in the liturgies, hymns, and prayers of the Church, but Christ himself has not penetrated our hearts.

C.F.W. Walther once said:

The first characteristic of a true Christian, and therefore also of a true Lutheran, is this: that he holds the true faith in his heart. Although a person is the child of Lutheran parents, has been baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran Church, is now a member of a Lutheran congregation and frequently goes to church, to confession and to the Holy Supper, all of this is nevertheless no sure evidence that he is necessarily a true Lutheran.

(C.F.W. Walther, Sermon preached Oct. 31, 1875, *reprinted in The Lutheran Witness*, May 1987.)

A Christian is someone who, as Walther says, “holds the true faith in his heart.” A Christian is someone who simply believes the promise of the Gospel. A Christian is someone in whom Christ himself dwells by faith (cf. Eph. 3:17). A Christian is someone whose stony heart has been so invaded by the love of God that he can no longer contain it.

This is the difference between recommending the Honda Accord based on reputation versus personal experience. This is the difference between one who says, “You should really try Jesus, I’ve heard he’s good.” and someone who says, “Let me tell you about my Lord and friend, Jesus Christ and about what he has done for me.”

This is why St. Paul prays that Philemon will come to “a full knowledge of every good thing that is in him for the sake of Christ.” (v. 6.) For it is only by this knowledge of what he has *received* that Philemon will become effective in *reaching* others with the life of God that flows through him by faith.

And what has Philemon received? What have we received? What is the treasure we hold for others in these jars of clay? The forgiveness of our many sins (cf. Col. 1:14). Abundant life (cf. Jn. 10:10). Peace with God that passes understanding (cf. Php. 4:7). The love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5). And a joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory (cf. 1 Pet. 1:8).

Perhaps Paul knows as he writes to Philemon, that it works the other way as well—that this full knowledge of what he has received will increase in Philemon the more he seeks to reach others by sharing his faith. It is no coincidence that we often enjoy things more when we share them with others.

Finally, St. Paul takes pains to thank Philemon for the joy and comfort he received personally through Philemon’s love with the knowledge that other believers have been refreshed through friendship with this follower of Jesus. He writes, “...I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” (v. 7.)

Beloved in Christ, it is indescribably refreshing to be loved by someone whose own heart has been overcome by the love of God.

May God grant us a full knowledge of the great love we have received through Jesus Christ so that we may become effective in reaching those who do not yet believe, both to the praise of his glory and for the refreshment of all the saints. Amen.

The peace of God that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.