

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15-23

HOPE, RICHES, GREATNESS

This past week, there were results from a survey released about religious belief and affiliation that indicated that while the United States is home to the most Christians in the world, the number who identify themselves as Christian is declining. The Pew Research Center had done a similar study back in 2007. This more recent survey, which was done last year, gives indication that there are significant trends going on in our country, including a noteworthy decline in the numbers who consider themselves to be mainline Protestants, which would include our Presbyterian denomination. In seven years' time, Christians have gone from 78% to about 70% of the population, while mainline Protestants have moved from being 18% to under 15% of the overall population. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages. Those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" increased from 16 to almost 23% during this time.¹ The survey results show what is happening, but does not indicate the reasons leading to these important changes. I have some opinions about what is behind these developments, but my hope is that further research will be done to give more reliable information about causes particularly related to Presbyterians.

Complacency in response to these numbers is not a viable option. But neither is panic, particularly because prayerful action is one of the gifts offered to us as an alternative to complacency or panic. Our passage from Ephesians today is one of prayer, expressing the author's gratitude unto God for the Christians who comprised the church in what would be near the western coast of modern day Turkey. That author, either the Apostle Paul, or one of his followers, tells those early Christians that prayers were being said on their behalf. The specific petition unto God requested that they would have the eyes of their hearts enlightened. The heart's eyes being enlightened is interesting imagery, as there are people within and beyond the church whose hearts seem to be closed off to the light that God wants to bring. The prayer envisions that such enlightened hearts would experience hope, riches, and greatness. That sounds good! Let's look at what is being described here.

We hear a prayer for the hope to which followers of Christ are called. Scripture includes quite a number of narratives that start with great despair, emptiness, dysfunction, and other foibles of humankind. The doorway toward hope is opened through admitting our human incompleteness. But through God's action in the world, there are new destinations of grace, reconciliation, peace, justice, and committed love that are reached. In the different stories, the route taken generally was a surprising one that did not look to be promising at the time, but the One who was offering guidance was the primary reason for hope along the way. No narrative was more surprising than when resurrection life came out of a tomb on that first Easter. That story changes how we understand our own story in this life and beyond it, giving credence to the prayer, and offering hope that hope can be a way of life for us too.

We next hear a prayer for the riches of God's glorious inheritance among believers. Some might hear a prayer for riches and be ready to buy that lottery ticket anticipating they will have reason to shout, "Alleluia." But in spite of what some prosperity preachers might say, the riches prayed for here are far more valuable than paper with green ink on it. Normally, someone has to die in order for an inheritance to be available, but those of us who believe become heirs of the richest way to live, that includes being so confident that God will supply our needs that we can share rather than hoard the resources in our care. It includes being so assured that we are valued by God that we have the freedom to hang out with and be enriched through relationships even with those of God's beloved who may be looked down upon by others. It enables us to entrust ourselves and our loved ones in God's great care. It involves recognizing the beauty of the gifts of creation so that we have no desire to trash them for what might be short-term gain. With a heart's enlightened eyes, we can see that there is great meaning in working for liberate and healing causes that go well beyond ourselves. Yesterday, a group of our deacons gave the better part of their day asking those who were shopping for groceries to consider buying food for hungry children they don't even know and now the whole front half of the stage in our social hall where the bags of food has been placed shows how the generosity of the deacons' hearts led to further generosity and the growth of a sense of community. That's a richness in living that money can't buy, but that God can supply.

And then there is the prayer for the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe. This isn't greatness of fame or force. Rather this is the kind of greatness that won't allow a hurtful action to necessarily lead to bitterness or to end a relationship. It is the kind of power that doesn't let what we fear be that which defines our lives. At times, it moves us out of our comfort zone of the familiar to explore the redemption zone of God's latest initiative. This kind of greatness doesn't give up in the face of obstacles along the way, but continues to explore even little cracks in the walls that might someday break open to the way of a deep and abiding peace, God's shalom. It won't allow hatred or indifference to hollow out one's love, responding to coldness with kindness. It enables us to surrender control of our own lives to One whose great purposes can unshackle us all. It is the very greatness of God that brings together people with all kinds of backgrounds and quirks, molding us into a community of caring and cooperation and coordination and joy as enabled by the very reign of God.

That was quite a thunderstorm that rolled through our area late yesterday afternoon. Lightning flashes above lead to the rumble of thunder that can shake things up a bit. George Herbert was a 17th century Anglican priest who was a poet who wrote a poem about prayer that included the description of it as "reversed thunder."² It is as if we have been given the power to send a lightning bolt of a prayer toward heaven that can shake it in thunderous ways. And if those prayers are for the right kind of hope, riches, and greatness for our efforts to follow Jesus, then I'm not sure how our society will respond to us, but I dare say that God in a survey would respond positively and that the very angels of heaven would respond with a thunderous "Alleluia! Amen."

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

² <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173636>