**Gratitude to a Giving God**

**Text: Galatians 6:9**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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37 years ago this past Thursday – May 18, 1980 – Mt. St. Helens exploded. The northeast face of the graciously rounded peak was blown-out by a rising dome of ash and magma, and the crown jewel of the Cascade Range was a jewel no more. The beautiful, forested landscape was transformed into an ash-covered moon-scape and everything was killed for miles around.

Fast-forward 37 years. The area around Mt. St. Helens is once again a luscious forest. The mineral-rich volcanic ash has rejuvenated the soil, a new eco-system has been created, and the area around the mountain is once again a Pacific Northwest paradise.

Sometimes it takes a cataclysmic event to rejuvenate a troubled landscape. And the landscape in Galatia was troubled indeed. Much of Paul’s first missionary journey had been spent in that Roman province. He had preached the Word, established churches, shepherded the infant flock and moved on, probably feeling pretty confident about the good work that he had begun; or, more accurately, the good work that the Holy Spirit had begun *through* him. But other folks, with a very different agenda, had come through Galatia after Paul left, and they had preached a very different “gospel” to the young churches there. These other preachers taught that you had to become a Jew before you could become a Christian. They taught that a follower of Jesus – the Jewish Messiah – must live according to the strict requirements of the Jewish law. There was no place for grace in their theology. You worked hard, you lived a righteous life, you took great pride in your good deeds, and you looked down in judgment upon those who didn’t live-up to your lofty standards. Those who think they are so virtuous that they don’t need God’s gracious forgiveness are not likely to be very gracious toward others.

When Paul heard about what was happening in the Galatian churches, he exploded! Because for Paul, of course, we are all sinners who can’t fulfill the just requirements of the law without the grace of God which both forgives us and empowers us. And so St. Paul, erupting like a human volcano, sent-off this angry letter to the Galatians, chastising the false teaching of the Jewish-Christians, and chastising the Galatians for believing such bunk! And no doubt many people were upset when they read Paul’s letter. One can imagine folks leaving the churches because Paul had criticized them, and others leaving because they couldn’t stand the controversy. And maybe, once the dust and ash settled, there were far fewer people in the Galatian churches than they had been when it seemed as if everything was going along so smoothly. But that faithful remnant knew the depth of sin, and experienced the amazing grace of God. It was this core of humble, faithful followers of Jesus, in churches all over the Mediterranean world, that helped to spread the Gospel of grace to the ends of the earth.

Sometimes it takes a cataclysmic event to rejuvenate a troubled landscape. Which is not to say that God wills such cataclysmic events. But it is to say that sometimes, in the wake of a tragedy that God did *not* will, God can pick-up the broken pieces and transform them into a work of art.

There’s a church in Ontario, a few hours north of Toronto, that has beautiful stained glass windows. They’re made from pieces of stained glass that a Canadian soldier picked-up as the Allies made their way from Normandy to Berlin during the final year of World War II. As he came upon one bombed-out church after another, he’d pick-up a shard of glass from each one and put it in his knapsack. When he got back to Canada, those broken pieces of glass were put together to form a set of beautiful windows.

We can see something like those pieces coming together as we read the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul begins the letter with words of anger, and he concludes it with words of grace. “Bear one another’s burdens,” he says. “If you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life,” he says. And then this verse, which I’ve come to love: “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” As we hear these words, one can imagine a troubled congregation already beginning to emerge as a place of faithfulness, and gentleness, and grace.

We can see the pieces coming together in Galatia. And we can see the pieces coming together in Bedford. It goes without saying that there have been some troubles here in recent years. The trauma that you’ve experienced might’ve killed some other congregations. But you all have never given-up. Because God has never given-up on you.

God never gives up on us. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” the Psalmist says, “thou art with me.” God is walking with us; therefore new possibilities are opening-up. God is walking with us; therefore resources for living are available to us; resources for living, and resources for ministry. Paul says we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. With the kind of building that we have, with the kind of camp that we have, with the kind of caring that is here, with the kind of Spirit that is here, there is every reason to think that great things can happen here. We can indeed reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. We can indeed reap at harvest time, because God is good. Come on, let’s say it again:

God is good (all the time).

And all the time (God is good).

God’s goodness is expressed in the way in which you all have not allowed yourselves to grow weary in doing what is right. When tough times have hit, you’ve done what you’ve had to do, as God has given you the grace to do so. When a congregational split took away your leadership 50 years ago, new leaders emerged in this place. When a financial scandal hit a few years back, you toughened-up your administrative procedures so that nothing like that could ever happen again. And you put in place a creative process by which much of what had been stolen from you could be restored. And when you realized, about a year ago, that you were living way beyond your means, a practice that just couldn’t be sustained, you put in place a realistic, bare-bones budget that has helped to put the finances of this congregation back on a firm foundation.

You did not grow weary in doing what is right. You did what had to be done. *God* did what had to be done *through* you. God provided the resources that have helped to stabilize the situation here. Because, of course, in the final analysis, that firm foundation beneath you is the grace of God, and the strength of God. Hard work and frugal living have put you in a place where you can once again be creative and generous in ministry. Because you have been held in the generous hand of God. And you did not give up.

When asked about generosity, particularly being generous with money, John Wesley reportedly said, “Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” By this I believe that he meant:

Work as hard as you can to make all the money you can.

Live as frugally as possible so as to save as much money as possible.

And, because your frugal living has minimized the money that you have spent on yourself, be very generous with all of that money that God has entrusted to you.

It seems to me that we’ve practiced something of that formula in this place, especially in this last year. We’ve worked hard, we’ve lived frugally, and now it’s time to be generous! Generous in our ministry, and generous in our giving so as to fund that ministry. Generous because we are go grateful for a generous God who has been so generous with us. Generous because we trust God to provide what we truly need. Generous with our first fruits, because a gracious God deserves our first and our best.

So now the time has come to make our financial commitments. Now the time has come to say to a generous God, “What return shall I make? What gift shall I offer in the coming year to finance faithful ministry in this place?” Many of us, I’m sure, have brought our pink pledge cards that were sent out in the stewardship packets 2 weeks ago. If you forgot yours, that’s not a problem: just raise your hand and a member of the Stewardship Committee will bring one to you. And if you need a pen, the committee members have some of those as well. Again, just raise your hand. In a moment Mary Ruth is going to play some music, and we’ll each have a few minutes to pray one last time over that financial commitment, and then I’d like you to fill out your pledge card, put it in the envelope that has been placed in your bulletin, and put the envelope in the basket that a Deacon will pass to you. So, hand-up if you need a pledge card or a pen. And, while Mary Ruth plays, let us pray.

*[Time for prayer and filling out pledge cards]*

Let us gather in our harvest of commitment!