

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

I think that if I had been one of those newly minted Christians in the ancient church at Ephesus, and had heard Paul's letter read aloud in the assembly, I would have found it life-changing. Through his preaching and his witness, Paul had gathered us together as a congregation, had shared our fellowship and our worship, and had then gone on his way to do the same in other towns. But he had not forgotten or abandoned us; he wrote to us from time to time, and, Oh, how we loved to hear from him, how we hung on his every word, how we read and re-read the parchment after the seal had been broken! It was so reassuring to hear him write about unity and peace and worthiness, about the confidence he had in us, that we, of all people, could be part of the actual body of Christ, despite our various individual differences. Well, maybe it was in fact because of our random differences. Maybe they weren't so random after all. It would have been life-changing at the time for me to hear that God the Father had given us each special and unique gifts, that some of us were given the ability to become good teachers, and others the ability to become prophetic, and still others to become effective evangelists. How fascinating, I might have thought, that embedded deep within me were strengths and talents just waiting to be discovered and celebrated! Gifts of God for the people of God. Blessings from birth, blessings by design.

We have spoken before of an "Anglican Sensibility", a particular perspective of our church's opinion, that blessings are not truly engaged unless and until they are used in God's service, in the service of love. Paul makes this point in his letter when he writes that these diverse gifts we have received were for the purpose of equipping one another for ministry, for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ. At least, that would be the mature view. Childishly, we might think these personal abilities and talents which make us so special are for our own enjoyment and self-absorbed gratification, but the true value of these gifts is in their contribution to the greater good, and the true joy of the gifted ought to be not so much in the receiving of their blessings, but in their application. When I had finally completed my formal studies, and was in formation to become ordained, my dear friend Kathlyn Scofield gave me this stole as a gift (you may be wondering why I chose to wear it today). The stole, as you probably know, is a vestment which signifies a yoke. Those who wear them are witnessing to the belief that they are yoked to God and to the people they serve in the name of Christ. A stole like this, no matter what the liturgical color, is a symbol of joyful responsibility. So, as we were preparing for the service, I took it to Bishop Skip and asked him to bless it for me. It seemed the appropriate thing to do. He responded by saying 'Nick, I could say some words over it, but its real blessing will come as you use it with your new congregation in the service of God's universal dream. Let's pray for that to happen.' Dear Friends, consider the talents and gifts you have received from the graciousness of God's Spirit...have you been able to apply them to the vision of universal love? Have they become the blessing they were intended to be?

David is a good biblical case in point: David was the recipient of remarkable gifts from God. He was a natural-born leader. He was apparently charismatic, clever, and attractive. God had instructed the prophet Samuel to anoint him pretender to the throne when still a young boy. His charm and resourcefulness had gained him great advantages and privileges, and ultimately the devotion and loyalty of the people he was intended to lead. God was with him. But there were, sadly, times when David neglected to use his gifts in proper service to those for whom God had elected him to be responsible. He became self-absorbed, and used his talented power to take advantages which were not intended. He began to enjoy a life of leisure in his new capital of Jerusalem, sending others out to do the kingly duties, seducing another man's wife, living a lie, and then, grotesquely, arranging for the murder of the woman's husband, a man who was singularly loyal and devoted to the king. David took the great gifts he had received, and squandered them. What could have been a blessing seemed to be headed for a curse. What could have been a mature witness to God's dream seemed destined to dissolve into childish mischief instead. Whatever kingly vestment or stole David might

have been wearing, he wore in those days with falsehood and hypocrisy.

Hoping to redeem the investment made in David's leadership, God sends Nathan, David's trusted and respected spiritual advisor, to bring him up short. Now, Nathan had the gift of prophesy, he had been called to speak prophetically the intentions of God, and told the king a fictional story about the misuse of kingly privilege. As David heard the story, about a rich man who stole a poor man's beloved lamb to be slaughtered for a festive banquet instead of using one from his own large flocks, he became enraged, saying that the evil rich man deserved to die, and ought to make fourfold restitution to the poor man. And Nathan is able to make God's point by saying: 'King David...you are that man!' And then he has the prophetic opportunity of describing the consequences David and his descendants will experience because of the sins committed thoughtlessly and selfishly. And, by the way, Nathan did all this very well, because he was a gifted and talented prophet, using the gifts God had entrusted to him in the service of universal justice and redemption. Imagine the humiliation, the shock, the horror David must have felt when he was moved to exclaim "I have sinned against the Lord."

When we drop a pebble, or some other object, into an otherwise reasonably still body of water, the splash creates a ripple-effect. This is high school physics. We can create a circular wave pattern which radiates outward with 360 degree vectors. Though the waves slowly and eventually diminish in amplitude, the initial impact on the surface tension makes a definite and predictable impression on the water's stability. We make waves. The effect is so common, in fact, that it makes a wonderful metaphor. We can use this lesson from physics to describe any number of things. Our behavior, for example. And the physics lesson really doesn't care whether it's good behavior or bad, it just keeps silently and reliably producing this metaphor-rich image. A momentary word, spoken either in anger or in love and dropped into the fluid of our lives, can ripple out beyond that moment with extending significance. I can clearly recall, from some sixty years ago probably, that my father, who didn't often vocalize his thoughts very often, told me that he was proud of me. We were alone in the car that evening, driving home from somewhere, and that unexpected comment is still rippling through my surface tension, and may have elicited a variety of responses in my life and others...I don't know. David's sin created waves of consequence in his time and beyond, but then so did his realization and confession of his own guilt. As we continue hearing his story during these weeks, we will, I think, be able to see where all those ripples go.

Jesus has dropped some bread and a couple of fish into the sea of people who have gathered to hear him, and the splash has sent rippling shock waves through their lives and through history. The people of the day are tossed about, metaphorically, by their own amazement. What kind of miracle was this? Who is this man who has managed such a thing? What do we do now, and where has he gone? What must we do to perform the works of God? What is our calling? What are our gifts? How will we be worthy? Where can we get some more of that delicious bread?? The questions keep rippling outward, and Jesus just keeps dropping more pebbles into the otherwise reasonably calm sea. "I am the bread of life" he says, and 'plop', another series of concentric waves ventures forth. The impact of each loving revelation can result in spreading blessings, can spread the kingdom wider, can help make the dream come true. But only when the message is not distorted as it radiates out from the center. The waves upon which we ride, by which we are moved, have the potential to become blessings when they emanate from Christ's word. The old, old story can always seem fresh and new as we discover the talents we have been gifted and put them to use in God's service. And we just love to tell that story! Amen.