

The First Millennium and the Challenge
Sermon for the service beginning the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Ephesians 1:3-14

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I have been asked to speak to you tonight on the challenges facing us at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another.

Perhaps we can see what the challenges are from the events of this last century.

Political, technological and religious advances were evident everywhere. Weapons of enormous destruction were created but they caused a virtual cold war in which no one dared to go to war with a superpower for fear of being annihilated. Evil, totalitarian regimes that appeared in this century were gone by the end, as good leaders seemed to triumph. Never before had the world seen such advances in technology, from enhancements to extend and improve life, to the advances that make food production possible for so many people. Buildings that scraped the sky itself were being built, taller than anyone had imagined possible; most feared that they would collapse in earthquakes that were sure to come. The Church made unprecedented advances into areas that were before off-limits to the Gospel.

But, there were defeats, too. Epidemics and disease wiped out thousands. We appeared to be in a standoff with warring Muslim countries, unable to advance or retreat. Islam grew as never before and whole areas of the world fell under the domination of Islam. Even more striking was the rise in the number of people within Christian countries that began to express their willingness to question the faith once handed on to them. At the end of the century, as at the beginning, the Balkans were crisscrossed by wars like brush-fires that could not be put out.

At the end of the century, Christians all over the world were asking themselves: what will the new century hold, and what will the dawn of a new millennium mean?

Does all of this sound like a pretty clear, even if general overview of the last century? Well, if you answered yes, you would be right; however, what I have just gone over with you was actually the state of the Christian world at the end of the first millennium, that is, at the end of the 900's AD not the 1900s AD.

Epidemics, like plague and smallpox and TB and rabies, were decimating parts of the world, just as cancer and AIDS do today. But, Arab physicians and scientists throughout the 900's had identified diseases and begun to treat them in ways that actually made it likely that we man could

bring a halt to the expansion of disease. Arab scientists, through advances in agricultural technology, had also made possible the virtual eradication of hunger.

By the year 1000, scientists in the East had perfected gunpowder as a weapon. Other scientists in China had discussed the possibility of floating or even flying in the air. In the West, architects moved beyond the fortress-like structures of the Romanesque period and began to build taller structures, like St. Mark's in Venice or the monastery church at Cluny.

By the year 1000, Christianity had reached beyond the known world to Iceland and Greenland. But, Islamic armies had invaded Europe and, though they had been pushed back to southern Spain, Italy, and Greece by the year 1000, they still posed a most formidable threat.

In fact, if we looked at every age of history, we would find pretty well the same story told and retold. Advances and defeats, victories and challenges. They are usually comparable and vary not so much in quality as in degree. Our ignorance of history has led us to believe that we are somehow the first to live in such a dramatic period of history and that everything focuses on us at this time. Every age thinks that the challenges facing it are the greatest ever, just as we think that the advances we have made are the greatest ever. They are, but only for our day.

But, through it all there is always one challenge that remains the same, no matter how advanced we think ourselves, no matter how behind we think others, there is one question posed in every generation to all people everywhere, and it is a very simple question: what does it mean to do good?

I believe that what motivates most people throughout their life and especially at the hour of their death is the hope, the belief, that they have done some good, or at least that they have been good at what they have done, whether its carpentry or hockey, accounting or repairs. As Saint Augustine said, even the burglar wants to think he's good at what he does! But most people also want to believe that they have made some significant difference in the world, at least to someone. Stephen Covey believes that knowing this will help people to use their time and energy better. Covey uses the imaginative idea of asking yourself what you would like to hear people say about you at your funeral to get people to think about what they are doing now. Surely none of us would want to hear at our funeral how glad everyone is that we're finally gone!

But, what does it mean for most people that they will be remembered as good workers, or good husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, or good citizens?

It certainly doesn't mean just doing what everyone else around you is doing. If everyone around you begins to commit adultery, that certainly doesn't make committing adultery good or right. If everyone around you believes slavery is right, that doesn't make having slaves good. If everyone around you starts to kill Christians or Muslims, that doesn't make killing Christians or Muslims good. But what does it mean then?

Over 2000 thousand years ago the philosopher Aristotle argued that doing good is the result of making good choices, no matter what those around you say or do. To choose to be a person of

truth in a culture of lies, to choose to be faithful when all others around prove faithless, to choose to speak well of a person who is not present when all others gossip and slander the person, to choose to fill your heart and mind with what is right rather than to sit there and let what is wrong wash over you and fill you.... All this is to do good simply because it is the result of good choices.

But, even this definition is not quite adequate. A string of good choices, such as these, may be good but it does not make the person who does them good. What if you make a series of good choices simply by accident? What if, for example, you would really rather lie but because someone is looking, or because you didn't have the opportunity, or because you didn't shave that morning and were worried about how you looked, you ended up choosing to do the right thing and not lie for all of the wrong reasons?

No, to do good follows from good choices, but good choices only happen consistently when they derive from a good character. Good character makes good choices possible, and when good choices are acted on, good is the result. To try to do good without having a good character is like trying to do a good job at something -- say brain surgery -- without the training. You might luck out and do a good job, but then again.....

Character is a good Greek word that has to do with engraving or scratching a distinctive mark on to something to make it either distinctive (as in an engraving) or to make it distinctively yours (as when you engrave your name on something). When it has to do with human character, then, it has to do with qualities of being human that are distinctive, that stand out, that are excellent.

And we all recognize character in some people. People with character are people you trust, people you would confide in, people who you can go to if you have a problem, people you would ask for advice. A mark of how rare character is can be seen in totaling up in your mind how many people you know who are like this. People with good character are people who make good choices and therefore do good.

So, given that most people want to be thought well of, the question we really all need to ask ourselves is: how do people end up with good character

Good character is not simply the result of birth or family ties, though it used to be thought that if you were born in a particular country you were good. If you were Jewish, you were God's elect; if you were a gentile, you were an immoral dog. If you were British, you were Christian; if you were African, you were a savage. It still is that way, at least in some places. If you are a Hutu, you are fine; if you are a Tutsi, you are an enemy to be annihilated. If you are Albanian, you are part of God's people; if you are Serbian, you are an enemy of God. But we know that ethnic background is no assurance of good character.

Nor is a good, godly family a guarantee of good character. It might create an environment in which character can be perfected, but it can't create it. The prophet Samuel was born of a most godly woman Hannah and yet when Samuel entered into the service of the priest Eli he didn't

recognize the voice of the Lord for, the text tells us, Samuel did not yet know the Lord. He might not have known the Lord later on either had it not been for something other than family.

Nor can good character be produced by science. We will in all likelihood not get to the point where, if we remove this gene and substitute that one, we will be good. No man is an island with no connection to people around him. The minute my genetically engineered son comes into contact with evil friends, my son's good choices will likely become perverted.

Nor can good character be produced by laws. There are many in our culture today who believe that if the politicians or the courts simply enact the right laws, this will change the character of people. But, how will changing laws on abortion or child pornography or guns or immigration make good people? The most these laws can do is to hinder the choices that some people will make, usually for fear of getting caught rather than because deep down inside they want to do something different. No law can make you good; it can only hinder and tell you when you've done wrong. The proof is that we are usually only aware of the law in our lives when it either keeps us from doing what we want to do or when we see the flashing red cruiser light in our rearview mirror.

Nor is good character produced by religion. No matter how much churches may agree on how we do things or what we believe, good character leading to good choices and good deeds is not produced by church law, or by ordinances and rituals (such as baptism or the Lord's supper), or by avoiding certain practices (like smoking, or drinking, or dancing, or dating), or even by making a decision to follow Christ and repeating certain words that say that you will.

Good character is produced only when you let the truth take hold of you and dwell in you and transform you. And, since God is the only one who ever perfectly and eternally knows and speaks the truth, character is produced when the truth takes hold of us, and dwells in us, and transforms us through hearing and heeding God's Word spoken to us. And since we believe that that has happened perfectly in Jesus, prophesied about in the Old Testament and borne witness to in the New, we believe that a good character will recognize Jesus as God's Word to us and be perfected as the truth, made known through Christ, dwells in the person's heart and mind. We also believe that a bad character can be transformed only by letting the truth, revealed to us by God in Christ, take hold of us, dwell in us, and transform us.

This is exactly what the author of Ephesians testifies to. He encourages those who hear and read his letter to open their eyes and ears to the truth and in doing so to hear the truth about your past, about your present, and about your future. To hear the truth that you are forgiven in Christ, whether you are an Anglican or an atheist, a Free Methodist or a Free Mason, a Jew or a Gentile, a Pentecostal or a pagan. In Christ, God is telling you the truth, that he loved you from the beginning of creation, before the Jews, or the British, or the Serbians, or the Hutus ever existed. In Christ, God is telling you the truth, that he set you aside to be his everlasting children, long before you were born, and long before there were nations and religions that told us that we might be brothers but only "separated brothers" or half-brothers or stepsisters or merely adopted. For in

Christ, God is telling us the truth that all of us who let the truth take hold of us are adopted heirs of God's own son and that it is his free gift to us because of the costly gift of his son.

In Christ, God calls us to know the truth and to let it dwell in our hearts and transform us. Paul elsewhere cautions us against knowing the truth and then, rather than letting it dwell in us and transform us, being like those who look in a mirror and see who they are, but then, turn away and immediately forget what they have seen. Character, like marriage, is not produced merely by a one-night stand with the truth, but, forsaking all others, by bringing the truth deep within and meditating on what we have seen and heard, finding delight in it day and night, and letting it transform us and so produce good character, that makes good choices, and that thus does good.

That transformation will happen, little by little. God guarantees us that it will happen through the power of the Spirit, and it will happen little by little.

Will you be perfect? No, at least not immediately. But, little by little, yes. Will you make mistakes? Yes, of course. Is the church perfect? Does it ever make mistakes? No, it's not perfect, and, yes, it makes many mistakes. Think how long it has taken the Christian churches to see the truth contained in Paul's little statement: "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female."

But, thanks be to God, little things happen little by little. The slave trade between Britain and Ireland only began to disappear at the beginning of the 2nd millennium. The slave trade between Britain and Africa and between the US and Africa only began to disappear at the end of the 2nd millennium. Today, into the 3rd millennium the slave trade still exists. But, little by little, here and there, some peoples and some societies, begin to look at each other and say, "I can't treat you as a slave any longer; you're a brother in Christ".

Only little by little have people begun to realise that just because someone is not part of their ethnic group or race, that person is not necessarily an inferior. Be it the Jews at the beginning of the 1st millennium or Anglos and Quebecers into the 3rd millennium, transformation from seeing others as inferior because of their ethnic background needs to happen again and again, and it does little by little.

Only little by little have men begun to realise that women are not chattel or inferior humans or merely passive. To the church's shame, the realization has often come not through the institution of the Church, but as God has spoken to the Church through Balaam's ass! But thanks be to God the voice of God comes and transforms. And be sure that that transformation of individuals and societies is sure, for God's own spirit is our guarantor that the walls of separation that divide Christians along ethnic, or social, or gender lines will come down, as God has promised in truth. It is part of his truthful and his beautiful plan for saving the world through transforming our character.

It is on this note that I want to conclude. I'm sure that you, like me, are attracted to what is beautiful. You see a beautiful person, and your head automatically turns to follow the person go by. You see a beautiful sight and your heart stops. Beauty attracts because it is a picture of what

we think is true: truly human beauty, or truly natural beauty, or truly divine beauty. The beauty of good character also attracts.

In the American Episcopal church, a church with which I have more than a passing acquaintance, today, January 23, is the day on which we remember one of the greatest American preachers of all time, and probably the only American Anglican to be known as a great preacher, Phillips Brooks, Bishop of Massachusetts, and outspoken opponent of slavery during the American Civil War, though he is probably best known to most of us as the author of the Christmas carol, "O little town of Bethlehem".

Brooks was a man of incredible beauty of character. It shone through him, not just in his astounding preaching and deeds, but in his character. And it was this that attracted others. Not only were his churches always full, but "one contemporary who saw him enter a streetcar reported that a hush fell on all conversation as he took his seat and all eyes were fastened on him until he left. When he passed on the sidewalk men looked at him, remarked about him, and turned to look again."

Now it is true that Brooks was an imposing man physically: 6 foot 3 and 300 pounds. But there were other imposing men in his day. So, his contemporary goes on to say: "Through years of disciplined effort he had become the embodiment of the ideals he sought to cultivate; it was this beauty of character rather than the uniqueness of his appearance which attracted men to him."

Perhaps we could ask ourselves whether we have this beauty of character that literally causes others to stop and remark? Perhaps we could ask ourselves whether our churches cultivate in us and in the church that beauty? Shouldn't this be the point we agree on, and then bring each of our strengths as individuals and churches to bear in making it happen?

Brooks died just before the end of the last century. If he had lived to see the turn of the century, I think he would have done what he did every Dec. 31 at Trinity Church, Boston, his last charge. Beginning an hour before the ending of the old year, "Brooks usually spoke briefly during the waning moment of the year to remind his hearers that "God's hand has held and guided us" and that during the next year "we may rest still more completely in his love, not because He loves us more, but because we may open our hearts wider to receive His love".

If it had been the end of the millennium, I think Brooks would have done exactly the same thing. Because, be it at the end of the 1st millennium or at the end of the 19th century or at the end of the 2nd millennium, what we need to hold before ourselves and our churches is the one constant challenge: **to open our hearts and minds more fully to let the character-transforming truth expressed to us in love by God in his Son Jesus Christ, guaranteed to us by His Spirit, take hold of us and transform us, and so truly to do good in this world for the time God has given us to love and serve Him.**

And now, unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be glory and honour with praise and thanksgiving both now and forevermore. AMEN