

Amos 9:11-15
Philippians 4:4-9
Text: Philippians 4:8

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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DOXOLOGY

In spite of its often harrowing tales of enmity, warfare and human evil (does that sound familiar in these times?), you really can't go too far in the Bible before someone breaks out into a hymn of rejoicing—a *doxology*. No matter how low the psalmist's spirit, virtually every psalm ends on a high note of praise. While the gospels know how to sing the blues, they all end on a doxology with the resurrection. In the Old Testament, few prophets take us into the pit of despair more deeply than Amos, yet his last chapter ends on a high note seldom surpassed in all Scripture, as does the often harrowing book of Revelation.

We saw such doxology on the two occasions we worshipped in churches in China these past seventeen days. Having gone through times of the most harrowing banning of faith, and of public and even private worship, especially through national decade long dark night of the soul known as the cultural revolution, Christians are now free to worship openly again in designated places—and they do. They turn up early, leave late, and sing as if it was the last hymn on earth. One woman, a professor in the University of Beijing, was so taken with Jane—without ever having met her before, that after worship she spontaneously gave Jane a beautiful jade necklace from around her own neck, beaming, and through an interpreter saying “We are sisters in Christ.” It was a sublime moment of pure doxology.

Doxology invites us to savor life: to pause privately and give thanks even over a poised bowl of cereal as we stand at the kitchen window, eyeing the clock on the verge of another frantic day. Doxology urges us to listen with a fresh ear as a child's day tumbles out in a pile of half-formed episodes even before the sound of the school bus has died away. It coaxes us to wind down the car window and let the rush of nature remind us of a world from which we insulate ourselves in never ending cocoons—in the house, the car, the subway, train or plane, the office, mall, and schoolroom. Doxology invites us to take life as a banquet, not as a fast food gulp on the way to somewhere. Doxology is taking time to say, “Lord, thank you,

thank you, *thank you.*”

Doxology is also taking time to say “thank yous” too long left unsaid. Some time ago, in one of those meandering moments of reflection on who my strongest influences were, I decided to track down the address and E-mail of the high school that I left forty-five years ago. I was just fifteen at the time and with few prospects. In fact my first full-time job was stuffing envelopes in a Christmas card factory. But I’ve long been conscious that, next to my parents, one of the most influential figures in my life was a form master (home room teacher) and art teacher who took me under his wing and gave a short, sensitive, and very self-conscious thirteen year old a new perspective and a new valuation of himself and his potential. The teacher’s name was Mr. Ormerod. Like most teachers, I don’t believe that he was born with a first name, just two mysterious initials, “N. E.”

I had felt for a long time that I wanted to say “thank you” to Mr. Ormerod, a dapper, always immaculately groomed, trimmed and starched man, quite different from the stereotypical “art teacher.” He took me aside in the corridor outside his second floor room one day and told me, not unkindly, that I could do better work, much better, and that he expected as much. He didn’t scold, although I remember that he was quite capable of a metamorphosis into the angel of death to us “second formers.” He inspired me so much that I did do better, and I remember with infinite pleasure the almost palpable satisfaction of doing better work. I got the form progress prize that year for “most improved.” I got to walk across that holy ground of the stage in the assembly hall at the annual prize day, to a packed house of prideful parents, and to applause—or so my memory embellishes—that sounded like I’d scored the winning goal in the F. A. Cup Final. A couple of times, on his own time, Mr. Ormerod took Ken Chapman, Clive Sutcliffe, and me to hear symphony concerts in the old Preston Market Hall. So I got to see the legendary Sir John Barbirolli conducting the Halle Orchestra, and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic with Charles Groves. I went, the first time, because I thought it would be a change from professional wrestling. But I went the second time because I was hooked. I’ve had a passion for classical music ever since. I don’t know that I ever really said “thank you,” beyond the sort of courtesy “thank you” that we are all taught to say, like “Thank you for the ice-cream, Aunt Mary.” For a long time now I’ve wanted to say a real thank you; I’ve wanted to let loose some doxology.

My sudden inspiration was learning about William L Stidger of Boston’s School of Theology who began to think through the blessings he’d had in life. He remembered the woman who had taught him in grade school, and of whom he had not heard in many years. Although it was years ago, he still recalled that she had

gone out of her way to put a love of verse in him, and Stidger has loved verse all his life since. So he wrote a letter to the old lady. She replied in the trembling scrawl of the elderly, and began, “My dear Willie.” He was thrilled about that. Stidger was over 50 at the time, bald, a professor, and he didn’t think there was anyone left in the world who would still call him “Willie.” It took thirty years off him right there. Here is her letter:

My dear Willie,

I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely and, like the last leaf of autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for 50 years and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue-cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has in many years.

Stidger is not sentimental, but he wept over that note. He began to think of other people who had been kind to him. He remembered one of his old bishops who had been most helpful at the beginning of his ministry. The bishop was in retirement and had recently lost his wife. Stidger wrote a belated letter of thanks to the bishop. This was the reply:

My dear Will:

Your letter was so beautiful, so real, that as I sat reading it in my study tears fell from my eyes; tears of gratitude. Then, before I realized what I was doing, I rose from my chair and called her name to show it to her—forgetting for a moment that she was gone. You will never know how much your letter has warmed my spirit. I have been walking about in the glow of it all day long.

Doxology!

It is an infectious thing, like yeast that makes something flat and self-conscious into something justly proud and confident. It is no less than a resurrection event that we perform. Given into the life of a child it can make life’s essential difference: a life withdrawn, shielded, fearful, now exploding with new possibilities, seeing new horizons. Given into an adult it can sweep away a sense of failure, a sense of the unprofitable life. Offered to God, it stirs in us the feeling of a migratory thing come home, and how the heart of God must thrill to hear . . .

doxology!

Amen.