

**“Good and Growing
Text: Philippians 1:1-11
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
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Atlanta, GA
November 4, 2007**

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6

The story is told of two friends who bumped into one another on the street one day. One of them looked forlorn, almost to the point of tears. His friend asked him, “What’s wrong? Why are you so sad?”

The forlorn friend answered, “Well I’ll tell you. Three weeks ago my aunt died and left me \$10,000.”

“Whoa, that’s a lot of money!”

“Yes well, but then, one week ago, a cousin I never knew passed away, and she left me \$20,000.”

“Sounds as if you’re being really blessed these days.”

“Just wait, last week I learned that I had inherited another \$100,000.”

Now, the friend was really confused. “Why do you look so sad?”

The friend answered, “This week, nothing!”

It does seem as if a sense of entitlement has taken over the souls of many people, who believe that they are owed things, are entitled to things. And yet, that sense of entitlement is utterly antithetical to the way of living that is captured by the word “gratitude”. We are actually owed nothing in this life. That we “woke up in our right minds” this morning, as the African American church would say, is a gift in itself. That we had the energy to get out of bed and come to church and sing songs to the glory of God is a gift from the bounty of God’s grace.

If the antidote to entitlement is gratitude, then the Apostle Paul was in perfect spiritual health. His letter to his friends in Philippi begins with a report of prayers of thanksgiving that he offers to God constantly, he says, every time he remembers them. He takes no good thing for granted; he rejoices regularly, though he is in prison, far from his friends. Someone (Epaphroditus) from the church has come to see him and has brought him a gift of provisions, and he is

sending back this thank you note. Paul had founded the community, the first Christian church on European soil. Obviously, he and the congregation have a very loving and special relationship. Not even Paul's current circumstances can diminish his gratitude or his confidence that God who began a good work in them would bring that work to completion one day.

I must say to you this morning that the spirit of Paul's letter is one with which I deeply resonate. Though I obviously had nothing to do with the founding of this congregation in 1925 – no I'm not nearly that old – I have been around for the past few years as this faith community has found fresh energy and discovered a renewed sense of mission. I thank God every time I think of how we have worked together and worshiped together and invited the Spirit of the Living God to come among us in unexpected and creative ways. Rarely have I heard what are called the seven last words of the church: "We never did it that way before". That is not to say that Morningside's traditions have been left behind or ought to be left behind. One of our greatest traditions is our commitment to excellence in the music ministry; that has been our constant through the lean years and the fat years. Caring for one another, for our members, for our friends, for strangers too, has never wavered. I think of the sanctuary so beautifully decorated every Christmas Eve, bathed in candlelight. I think of how we gather and eat crackers and dip and drink punch and have a great time after church every Sunday. (I remember having a nervous breakdown when I volunteered once to do the punch, and I had not made punch in about 35 years. Al, my husband, offered to help. He went to the grocery store and bought 5 cans of pineapple juice and 5 bottles of ginger ale, and it was delicious!) Anybody can do "Parlor," which is one of the traditions of Morningside that holds us together.

The ancient rituals of the Christian church hold us together as well. In a few moments, we will engage in the tradition of the Lord's Supper, a sacrament that was actually given to the church by Christ himself. I like these words of Religion Scholar Houston Smith. He refers to "the great [Christian] tradition as the voice of peace and justice and beauty that emanates from the soul." That tradition is quite different from traditionalism, which can be frozen in time and hard-edged in practice. (1)

As Paul was grateful for the generosity of the Philippians, I thank God for your generosity. So many of you have given generously, and sacrificially even, to restore the organ and refurbish the sanctuary and make our facilities accessible to all. And now in stewardship season, we will be asked to consider what our financial priorities are for the annual budget, as families and individuals. At the congregational meeting after church today, you will have the opportunity to vote on a recommendation from the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee. If you vote yes on the candidate who will be brought forward for your approval, you will be committing this congregation to continue to grow – to grow financially to support the position. You will be committing this congregation to grow spiritually

as the gifts of this new minister folded into the mix here in a deeper, fuller and more meaningful way.

Like Paul, I am confident that what God has begun among us here in the first decade of the 21st century has only just begun. The Philippians were not well-off. In their affluent, cosmopolitan city, they would never have been considered the elite or the wealthy, but they were unfailingly generous. They gave what they could in order to support what needed to be done, which included Paul's ministry of proclamation and support of his physical needs. I thank God as Paul did for your generosity, time, energy and gifts you have brought to the cause of Christ here.

I have been genuinely inspired by the Website Committee. Building on the good work of Aaron Bertrand over the last 10 years, we have continued to grow and to move out in faith. We spoke last week of the Reformation and the birth of Protestantism. Do you know that one of the main reasons that Protestantism succeeded in the 16th century was that Martin Luther and his compatriots bought in to what is now called "the Guttenberg Revolution"? The Catholic Church was suspicious of printing Bibles and printing explications of the meaning of the Bible, but Luther was not. He and his cohorts printed thousands of pamphlets and Bibles. The invention of the printing press radically altered the church's voice in the world and enabled the message to be spread across the world. People were at last able to read the Bible in their own language. (2)

I am convinced that the technological revolution we are in the midst of now is of similar significance, not in place of the living, breathing community of faith, but as an extension of it. Technology gives the church of Christ a way to reach out, to live out the great commission to go into all the world. Hartford Seminary sociologist Scott Thumma has written recently, "I hear people all the time say that in their congregations they talk to people who say, 'I visited your website and now I'm here. I checked you out on the website to see what you stood for.'" And listen, if people can find a congregation that fits who they are and what they need and will challenge them, they are more than likely to make a long-term commitment and be serious participants in the life of that congregation. (3) So many of our new members looked us up on the web and said to themselves, "I'd like to go and see what's happening there." I'm proud to say that on many websites, we are listed as a church that welcomes all people. That seems to me to be a particularly obvious thing for a Christian church to do, but sadly, it is not always the case.

Good and Growing. That is the theme of this fall season. We are growing in faith. We are growing in love. I don't know whether you are aware that our church has grown significantly in numbers - over 60 new members each year. We are not seeking new members for the sake of numbers. The whole point of the Christian church is to give people the experience of God. That's why we're here, to broker, to be the vessel through which people come to know God and find ways to love

and serve their neighbors. You have heard that our denomination is not growing numerically, that most mainline denominations are not. A church and religion expert named Diana Butler Bass conducted a study of 50 congregations to see if all mainline churches were dying, or whether there were some who were alive. Her book on the subject is entitled *Christianity for the Rest of Us, How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*. We were not one of those 50 churches, but friends, we could have been, because we are exactly in line with what she found. Churches that are vital and growing are community churches that take the Bible seriously, but not literally. They pay attention to Scripture study and prayer. Hospitality is not just given lip-service but is a part of the fabric of the place. Worship is at the center. God is glorified, and the human spirit is elevated. I cannot tell you how many times after church, people who have visited thank me for the hour they have just experienced. They mention the music, how friendly people are; they are grateful for what has happened.

We are a congregation that commends the Gospel to others with confidence and compassion. Our confidence is not in ourselves, but in God's willingness to keep the promise that in the end the saints will be gathered and all things will be made new. In the between times, which is where we are, our "love overflows more and more," to use Paul's words, "with knowledge and insight to help us determine what is best."

We are a neighborhood church in one of the most prominent cities in North America. I believe our time has come. I am thrilled to be a part of this period of rebirth and adventure. I feel privileged to offer, along with you, the love of Christ. I like what one member said about her congregation after she had suffered a great loss in her life: "If you ever get the notion that you are not loved around here, someone will correct that in a heartbeat." (4)

In a moment, we will hear the Words of Institution at the Lord's table. The words begin, "After he had given thanks, Jesus took bread and broke it..." Think about the occasion. In anticipation of the great loss that was just ahead of him, he gave thanks to God for the sustenance that would enable him to face whatever he had to face, to endure whatever had to be endured. Do you know what the word Eucharist means? It means thanks; *eucharisto* – "I give thanks." On the worst night of his life, Jesus gave thanks with his friends around the table, he broke bread with them and for them, and then went on to give his life for the redemption of the world.

Today, we rejoice in what Christ has done for us. In times of struggle, we are grateful that we are sustained. In times of strength, we are grateful for the encouragement. But whatever time it is, Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory and praise of God.

We are not what we're going to be, or what God thinks we ought to be, but we are not what we used to be. I look forward to growing in faith and living in love with you my sisters and brothers in Christ.

(1) Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Harper Collins, 2006, p.47.

(2) From a column written by John IZard, Trustee, for the newsletter of *The Alliance for Christian Media*, Fall, 2007.

(3) As quoted by Bass.

(4) Bass, p.68.