

How to Respond
January 2, 2011
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Sometimes I just love to get mail. More often than not I get boring mail: bills, subscription notices, credit card offers with my name misspelled and the like. Then it is not so much fun to get mail. But then there are the other times—those times when the mail brings a book, CD, something for a hobby, or maybe even something really wonderful like unexpected good news. It can go either way with mail—sometimes it can be dull, or unwanted, and other times it might be the best news you could hope for.

The Epistles in the Christian Scriptures are the same way. They were actually mail once upon a time for one thing. But also, and more significantly, their contents could vary quite a lot. Sometimes they include notices we would rather not get, like “shape up and treat each other better, you aren’t quite being the church you should!” But on other occasions they are full of praise and rapturous reminders of just how much God loves us all. I am pleased to say that this morning’s letter is of the rapturous kind.

Blessing is evoked three times in the first half of the first sentence. Language of love and forgiveness and glory follows. And the reading tells us the best news we could hope for: we are forgiven, redeemed and loved people. God loves us now and always, and has done so even “before the foundation of the world.”¹ Ours is a good and loving God, who seeks out the best for us and the whole creation, and who intends to “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”² That means you, that means me, that means *everyone*. And that is very good news indeed. And all this good news and rapturous talk raises a question: how can we possibly even *respond* to a love as big as the one God has for us?

In his earthly ministry, Jesus talked constantly about how important it is that we treat each other well, because that demonstrates our relationship with God. The more we love one another the more we love God. The more we love God, the more we will love one another and treat each other well. And the human being with whom we have the longest and most cantankerous relationship is our self. So we need to pay particular attention to our relationship with our self in exploring our relationship with God. We need to treat ourselves well in order to treat God well. And that necessarily involves honesty.

The ancient Jewish prophets call the people again and again to repentance; to turning back to God whenever we go astray. Jesus also calls for this. None of them do this to help us

¹ Ephesians 1:4.

² Ephesians 1:10b.

accumulate guilt points. None of them do this to encourage us to feel worse than we already do. Quite the opposite, the intention of repentance is to help us feel less burdened, and more able to love one another and God. It is a form of self care.

Folk singer Dar Williams has a terrific lyric in a song about going to therapy called *What Do You Hear in these Sounds*. I think of it as applying directly to repentance. She says “Oh how I loved everybody else, when I finally got to talk so much about myself!” When we really get honest about who we are, warts and all, it can help open our hearts to other people’s eccentricities and particularities and help us to be more accepting of everyone. So, it is a gift for us to repent because it is a cleansing and reorienting act that helps us to see ourselves, God and others more clearly.

And this is how we can respond to God’s big, hard to believe, enormous love. By being honest and turning toward God’s love rather than away from it and into our own worries and fears. Through doing so, we help God to do God’s work, and we contribute in a small, but none the less consequential way “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

And what better time to do that than the beginning of a new year, when we are already thinking about resolutions and change? And how better to make our resolutions than to invite God into the change we wish to embrace?

So, friends, if you have not done so already, consider your response to God’s love and grace. How will you work to live into being the person God wants you to be in the coming year? What struggles will you release? What burdens will you lift to God’s care? What do you need to confess to God to begin this new year with a clean slate and a clear mind?

When you have word, or an image or a short sentence which sums that up, write it on the slip of paper you were given at the start of worship. Or maybe nothing will come, that is OK, too, blank sheets are welcome, too. Then, when it is time to join in our confession, bring it forward to a candle and let it be taken up in the fire and into God’s care. And let that act of deep honesty be your reply mail to God’s good news of love and reconciliation.

Amen?

Ephesians 1:3-14

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.