

The IM-perfect Church

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Date: 27 January 2013

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[0 : 0 0] you've gathered us here together this morning as your people, Heavenly Father. And we ask that we would be conscious of your presence and we pray that you would draw us up into your own mind and heart to see things perhaps we've not seen before so that we might be people we've not been before all because of your love and your grace.

So we pray that you would be our teacher and your glory our great concern as we look at this little passage together in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I add my welcome to Dan's to this second Ebenezer Sunday.

We did this last year, a special Sunday of thanks to God to recommit ourselves to him. And last year, I think at this time, we were very conscious, weren't we, of God's goodness and his hand of blessing and provision.

And I wonder whether this Sunday, this year, you feel more or less thankful than you did this time last year. And I ask that question because it matters to God whether we give him thanks or not. not because he is needy and he needs it, not because he's like an insecure uncle who gives a present and is not happy until you give him thanks, you know, the sort of conditional giving.

[1 : 3 8] Now, God continues to give us and to pour out his grace on us whether we are thankful or not, actually. But it matters to God that we give him thanks because we need it.

And every Sunday, this is one of the wonderful and sneaky things about the Anglican liturgy, everything, every Sunday, we give thanks to God. You may not be aware of that or not. But Sunday by Sunday, in both morning prayer and in the Lord's Supper, we give thanks to God.

But it's good to take one Sunday a year, I think, particularly close to the beginning of the year to do this in a focused way. But the thing about thankfulness and the thing about gratitude is that you can't work it up.

You can't, from a minister, preacher's point of view, you can't compel it or force it or manipulate it. I know, I've tried. It doesn't work.

When we have children, we try and teach them to be thankful. Thankful to others, don't we? And that's just politeness. But the difference between being a grumpy person and a grateful person is really an issue of the heart.

[2 : 5 3] The difference between feeling entitled or entrusted comes from something else. It's not something that we can develop in ourselves, although it can be a good discipline.

Because a grateful heart is primarily a response. It's a reaction. It's the result. It's the effect of something else. It's the effect of receiving something.

And more particularly, when we're in a sense of need, receiving something that genuinely helps us and supports us. One of the best, one of the, I hesitate to use this illustration, one of the best illustrations of this comes from my own life.

When I lived in Australia, this is a surf life-saving story, and I'm going to tell it whether you like it or not. I was, during one summer, I was on an unpatrolled beach, and there were no lifeguards there. And there were big waves. There were dumping waves. And a couple of young teen guys took their little bodyboards, foolishly, out to ride these waves.

[4 : 0 0] The waves would just rise up seven, ten foot high, and then completely collapse. And I sat up and watched as they both got their first wave and were pounded like a sack of potatoes.

And one was washed in, and the other was washed out. And he was obviously having a lot of trouble keeping his head above water. And I'd like to tell this story in such a way as you know that I'm a fabulous hero, but actually it wasn't like that at all.

It wasn't very dangerous, and it wasn't very far to go, and there was nobody else on the beach to do this. So I went out, and I grabbed him, and I dragged him back in, and I half carried him up on the

beach as he was spluttering to get his air back.

By the time I got back to the beach, his parents had come running down, and they were at the water's edge. And I gave the boy to them, and do you know what they said to me?

They said to me, absolutely nothing. Isn't that amazing? Were they grateful? I don't know. They didn't say anything. I didn't do it so that I'd get gratitude, but I remember thinking at the time, that's really odd.

[5 : 16] Well, I think a Christian who's not thankful is odd. And that's why I've chosen this passage, because it tells us that God hopes for certain kinds of responses from us as he pours out his grace toward us.

God is in the position to command these things, but it's very interesting. In this passage, some commentators call it a bed of lettuce, because three times the writer says, let us.

Look down verse 22, verse 23, verse 24. Let us, let us, let us. That's a bed of lettuce, you see. And Christians who received this, it's written to Christians in Rome having a really rough time.

After they'd become Christians, they were persecuted, and some of them had suffered physical violence, some of them had been imprisoned, some of them had suffered theft of their own property, and some of the folk in Rome were just weary.

They were shrinking back. It just all seemed too hard. It's lovely to see the way God deals with them in this book. And it's fascinating, I think, for us here, because God doesn't bring out the big stick.

[6 : 34] He doesn't say, this is your duty. You're bad Christians if you don't do this. In fact, the book of Hebrews does almost the opposite. For the whole of the first 10 chapters, the writer has explained how marvellous Jesus is, who he is and what he's done.

He's a brilliant saviour. He's brought a brilliant salvation. And as he comes to these, let us, let us, let us, in two verses, three verses, 19, 20, and 21, he just summarises the 10 chapters.

So this is quite condensed and very rich material. But let me just remind you of what Margaret read, 19 to 21. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we now have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, actually, literally it reads, since we have boldness, freedom of entrance by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God and then there are the three, let us, let us, let us.

What's the tone? It's joyful, isn't it? It's confident. It's bold. There's a large sense of privilege. It's about what Jesus has done for us by the blood on the cross, by the tearing of the curtain of his flesh.

Jesus has given us entry into the holy places, which throughout the book is the place of God himself. What Jesus did by his death on the cross is opened the door, opened the path, opened the way into the presence of God and it remains open and the writer says we approach God now not just tentatively, not just respectfully, not just reverently, all of which are true, but boldly, boldly because we don't have to guess when we go into the presence of God what God's reaction will be.

[8 : 48] It's not as though last week he was very welcoming but this week, I've had a very bad week this week. I've messed up big time. I've sinned like you wouldn't believe and so this week I come tentatively.

Do you remember in the Old Testament book of Exodus, when God had brought the people out of Egypt to himself on the mountain and he appeared on the Mount Sinai.

Do you remember that scene? We looked at it three years ago, four years ago. Well you remember that scene, it's in the movies anyway. Remember the key message that God gave the people and God gave Moses at the mountain was stay back, stay back, you'll die.

And when he instituted the sacrificial system and the tabernacle, it was still stay back and only one person could enter into the holiest place where God was, where God's presence was and that was the high priest and he could only do it once a year and you know they tied a rope around his ankle when he went in behind the curtain in case he was overwhelmed and overcome in the presence of God and they had to drag out his body.

What Jesus has done you see is it just makes all the difference. What Jesus has done in his death is to make us perfect once for all.

[10 : 15] This is almost too hard to believe. Just cast your eye back in Hebrews 10 verse 14. This has been the verse that has been my meat and drink all week.

For by a single offering Jesus has made perfect it's a past action with ongoing consequence it's completed for all time it's an intensifier those who are now being made holy.

Do you see what it's saying? In the cross of Jesus Christ all who belong to Jesus he has made perfect eternally and now he's making us holy.

Are you conscious of letting him yes we fail him yes we continue to sin we continue to repent we don't love each other as we should. We continue to struggle against being greedy and lustful and angry and self-focused but here's what it's saying that because of the death of Jesus God looks on you and me as perfect as perfect as he is and because he has gone into heaven and sits at the father's right hand it says that he has written our names he's written our names on his hand and when we enter into the we enter into the presence of God our name is written there and God says this one this one is perfect and that's why we have boldness and confidence to enter the holy places as long as Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the father we are welcome and we are welcome not just to the symbols of God not just to the throne or to the temple but we come to God himself we come to God in his true and spiritual dwelling in heaven and through Jesus Christ we now have constant fellowship and communion with him we are present with God that's what it's saying now how does that show how do we show our gratitude for that that's the first this is the big question how does God expect us to show and to live gratitude lives of gratitude out of this does he call on us to make a grand quest you know to go out and conquer dragons and tame nations or is it the other way around tame dragons and conquer nations and actually it's okay if you want to do that that's fine but what God desires from us is a life around shaped around three activities and they are the three let us's so we're going to look at these three practical activities for this

Ebenezer Sunday and the first one is in verse 22 let us draw near okay so this is the first shape of our lives verse 22 let us draw near obviously to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water this just overflows with encouragement I think and assurance it says that the Christian life is a life of ongoing access and drawing near to God every day every hour through Jesus Christ we may draw near to him what he's saying is that if you follow Jesus Christ you live in the presence of God now and he's calling on us to be conscious of this and to act on it in other words the Christian life is a life of worship our whole lives are meant to be a life of worship we're meant to be continually entering into the presence of God in the Old Testament worship was different worship was a very particular set of rituals and procedures by which you approached the presence of God you had to do it on a certain place you had to do it on a certain day you had to do certain actions but through the death of Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection all that has changed and the message is no longer stay away the message is now draw near and our worship as we follow

[14:57] Jesus Christ is not restricted to once a week when we gather our whole of life is meant to be lived in the presence of God what God desires is that we practice the presence of God you may have heard that phrase I think this is a little bit like in John 15 where Jesus said to his followers abide in me as I abide in you this is our side of that that thing that Jesus commands so Jesus abides in us whether we feel it and whether we understand it or not but he calls on us to deliberately and consciously abide in him to draw close to God to walk with him to receive his fellowship and it's not just prayer prayer is part of it it's the freedom of living consciously and entering more deeply into the presence of God it's a life of worship you see it's not worship that leads us into the presence of God it's the death and resurrection of Jesus by which we have boldness and confidence to enter and you may feel that is way too presumptuous for me you've got no idea how sinful I am and I

I probably don't or you may just feel I'm terribly inadequate and guilty or you might feel like me sometimes that and this is a confession I feel like sometimes I have to demonstrate to God that I'm genuine you know I have to prove to him before he'll take me back into his presence well you may be interested in this but just too distracted to think about it really here's the wonderful thing the amazing thing about this is that our confidence of access to God does not come from anything inside us our confidence is in Jesus Christ and I think one of the main reasons why we do not draw near to God is we keep wanting to shift the ground of confidence from Jesus into me from something outside to something in me and so if I've had a really bad week God seems less welcoming and that's what this verse means it says we draw near the writer it says with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water that's something done to us by Jesus there's nothing you could do there's nothing

I could do that could make ourselves more acceptable to God it's been done by Jesus and that's why the heart the true heart is full of assurance it's not talking about whether you feel sure or not it's talking about the fact that faith is in Jesus it's not in us it's in Jesus our faith is directed to him and what he's done is sure and they're true hearts because as we continually and constantly draw near to God this is what our hearts were created to do this is who we truly are and so long as we're not drawing near to God our hearts are restless because they continue to be restless and agitated outside the presence of God because only God only resting on God only God is sufficient to satisfy our hearts and so we draw near to him and as we do that our hearts find their rest in him for his own sake so that's the first let us the first response that God is looking for the first way to show gratitude there's no reason to stay away from his presence no reason to avoid him every reason to draw near so let us draw near secondly let us hold fast verse 23 let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful you know that as Christians we talk about the Bible speaks about hope in a different way than it's used currently it's not a vague imagination something uncertain it is a confident expectation based on the sure promise of God and in the book of Hebrews hope is not something inside us it's something outside us again and where is that hope where is what is our

Christian hope just turn back a page to Hebrews 6 for a moment please Hebrews 6 verse 19 we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf you see the picture we live in a world of constant change don't we and sometimes it's smooth sailing but more often than not we hit storms and what hope do we cling on to in the midst of storms our culture tells us hang on to your own inner resilience or trust your friends good good advice but what hope can be guaranteed what's hope guaranteed by God what's a hope that is unchangeable immovable and eternal in every storm very important it's Christ who has gone through the heavens and there he is seated at the right hand of the father he is our anchor he's gone in behind the curtain and like ships that are being tossed about on the ocean we are held to him by this line of hope our connection with Jesus and the command is we are to hold it fast because here's the sure and steadfast anchor of our souls the storms rage don't they some of us find ourselves in situations that are humanly impossible I think of a number of us at St. John's who are in this context right now very hard to know what to hope for humanly speaking what to expect and impossible situations added to that is my own sense of my failure and a deep sense of fatigue and I'm just holding on and the waves are too big and there's just this downward pressure all the time here's the thing Christ has now brought us into the presence of God and the one rope that we hang on to more tightly than anything else is the only rope that's certain and secure it's Jesus himself because he will not let you go he is holding you and this is an invitation and a call for us to hold on to him and this is the second life the second activity the second response to the grace of God the first is to draw near the second is to hold fast our hope and as the waves wash over we hold on to our hope like an anchor well what's the third let us the third piece of let us it's in verses 24 and 25 go back to chapter 10 and let us consider one another literally well let me read it as it's there in the text let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good deeds good works not neglecting to meet together is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near

[22 : 53] I know that's how the text reads but it's more literally let us consider one another and then toward the rest now this is a passage that ministers pull out when people stop coming to church and you may have heard some very stern sermons on this passage about missing church attendance and it's understandable but it's not really the point of the passage it's not the point of these verses what these verses are doing is that they're spelling out the effect of what Jesus has done for us in very practical terms they are shaping our gratitude to Jesus let me put it to you this way through Jesus each of us who've come to him live in the presence of God all the time if that is true the writer says what we should now do is we should consider notice be conscious of others who are standing in the presence of God consider one another he says understand just is that clear do you want me to say it again should I just stop the sermon now is that clear can I say that should I say that again okay this is what it is to be a Christian all of us through Jesus

Christ live in the presence of God now you are present to God now spiritually you bring the presence of God with you into the building because you are present with God you take the presence of God with you out of the building and therefore let us draw near constantly let us hold fast our hope and thirdly he's saying let us consider one another when we're in the presence of God

as we practice the presence of God as we draw near to the presence of God the writer is saying we ought to be aware of and conscious of the others who are there consider others be conscious of it it may not be natural to do it but he's saying do it you see we do it because we're present with God right now and if that's not clear Dan will explain it later there's all sorts of natural consequences of this if you are practicing the presence of God if you are going to God during the week then it will express itself in fellowship with others because we share a common hope in other words if you're in the presence of God and deliberately seeking his presence it will overflow into a consciousness of others consider one another now I know this may be hard to take in and I think it's hard to take in because we live in a culture so deeply committed to individual autonomy and we are as well it infects us doesn't it we are proudly disconnected from one another as the Vancouver foundation discovered isolated disengaged uninvolved and lonely and many people are hungry for community but only on their terms only on certain terms only so long as it doesn't ask too much of me or doesn't interfere with my personal privacy and if you're a newcomer a visitor this morning from the outside it might look as though one person's Christian life and another person's Christian life are completely independent and disconnected but that's not true because when we come to faith in Jesus Christ something very radical happens we begin to live in the presence of God and we have a growing consciousness of others who live in the presence of God as well and there's a fundamental shift in our identity from one that is just individualistic to understanding ourselves as part of a family a community and a body this is where true Christian community comes from true Christian community doesn't come from the minister preaching a hundred sermons on community true Christian community doesn't come from dozens of programs to build community true Christian community comes from those who are drawing near to God and have access to God during the week it's only as we draw near to God that we gain the sense of taking responsibility for one another to help each other become better Christians to watch over and to watch out for each other and what does that look like well he tells us negatively and positively negatively verse 25 it means not neglecting to meet together is the habit of some let me just reiterate and say it's not a command there's no command in the New Testament to come to church you'll be interested to know but we don't come to church you see it's very important so as to enter into the presence of God you bring the presence of God with you to one another and therefore if one person misses and is not here it's we who miss out because they fail to bring the presence of God to us you see so gathering with other Christians whether you want to gather with other Christians this is why I think the New Testament doesn't command it it's just it's a it's a certain measure of whether we draw near to God during the week our desire to gather comes from experiencing God's presence and wanting to share his presence with others and that's what makes a Christian gathering authentic so if we don't draw near to God during the week if we don't live in his presence we don't consider others who are in his presence church will feel artificial gatherings will always feel a bit fake so if you belong to God and you're seeking to live in his presence continue to meet together he says and some in the church of Rome had begun to drop out they'd stopped meeting together and you can understand why and there were all sorts of pressures pressures of business pressures of children pressures there were just better things on offer and I think it is easy to miss gatherings I remember when Harry Robinson retired and a year later we invited him back into the congregation he said to me all my life I've been paid to go to church he said it's very difficult to come to church week by week now and there are legitimate reasons of course to miss but if it becomes a habit the voice the verse here says that's a danger become a habit of heart where you say no one's going to miss me I've got so many other good options and what we do is we avoid honest conversations and you'll see in yourself you become reluctant to spend time with Christian friends and it's just all becomes a bit of an effort but I do want to give you a little warning if that's happening to you it's a heart problem just turn back to chapter 3 for a moment verse 13 but exhort one another or encourage one another every day as long as it is called today that's daily that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin we have an utterly fabulous capacity to deceive ourselves to be doing something completely contrary to God's will and justifying it ourselves convincing we're doing fine and the writer says neglecting to meet together in small groups or in large groups shows a certain disregard for others in the body and a hardness of heart and a drifting from the presence of God and if we consistently neglect meeting with other Christians we're in danger of neglecting God himself that's what it's saying well what does it mean positively we go back to chapter 10 and I finish with this let us consider one another how to stir up one another to love and good works encouraging

one another verse 25 this is not written to the clergy and staff of the church at Rome it's written to every member of the church you as a Christian community must take responsibility to watch over the other members of this congregation that's your responsibility see church is very different than going to a movie or to a theater you're not an audience of spectators watching a show running quickly away afterwards you have a I'm sorry I know it's heavy but you have a responsibility to encourage one another and I think that means more than just coming into this gathering it means being involved in the lives of others who are living in God's presence and you know just don't do it right now but take a peek around you sometime in the service the others around you need your encouragement they need your encouragement in the early days of the

[32 : 19] Methodist church when you became a member you signed a covenant and one of the promises was we engage to watch over one another in love now how do we do that we stir one another to love and good works this is a great word it's the word for irritate and some of you are very good at this to that's not an insult we are to provoke to prod each other to love God better and to be committed to good works means afterwards a coffee our priority is to have conversations that are deeper than the weather it doesn't mean we're all deep and serious and you know heavy all the time but it does mean making the most of our time and aiming to encourage others I hope you come asking the question not how will others encourage me but how will you encourage others looking around seeing someone you might help to love God more and do good deeds all the more as we see the days drawing near so on this Ebenezer Sunday we have a great deal to be thankful for I think as a church and as individuals

God wants us to show our gratitude to him by drawing near by holding fast and by considering one another and last year at this time we wrote notes anonymously to God answering a couple of questions and this year I want to invite you to do the same so in the pews there are cards that look like so and there are pencils and I wonder if you would begin to pass them along there are enough cards for this service and for the next service so I do hope that you leave half the cards in the pew if you put the extra cards back in the bag at the end of the puke so we can do this again at 11 that'd be great now I don't want this to be forced and therefore

I'm calling on you to do this as God would lead you but there are two questions and they're a little different from last year now the first question is what were it should be what are I'm sorry what are you thankful now to God for during this last year that is it's a very specific question and it may have to do with St. John's or may have to do with something completely other and then the second question is what will you pray for at St. John's over the next year last year I asked what are you asking God to do it to do but it was very general but after thinking through Hebrews 10 I want us to I want us all to commit to pray for something at St.

John's over the next year and not just to pray for ourselves and what we're going to do now is we're going to take three or four minutes to fill out these cards and the choir will sing an anthem while we do that and then I'll ask you to hold on to the cards and there's a time in the service called the Ebenezer offering where we will collect the cards and I'm going to invite you to come forward as a David and David Averin and I stand at the front here with the baskets to collect the cards and we're going to fill the Ebenezer jar again the children will join us later in the services they've been working on something as well some pictures I believe but this is a time for you anonymously to write down on these cards something you're thankful for and something you'll pray for at St.

John's and I want you to know that we will refer to these cards during the year some of the things that you say we will be will be used publicly so let's take three or four minutes just to write our answers to the questions on those cards and the choir will lead us through the anthem and then Dan will take over as we join together in the Creed thank you