



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE SIXTH SUNDAY
AFTER PENTECOST**

JUNE 30, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Rather than preach as usual, let me share with you this morning a letter we recently received. The postmark reveals that it was mailed from Ephesus in Turkey. We will observe that the introduction is uncharacteristically formal for modern times. Copies are available in the narthex. The letter reads as follows:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the church of God that is in Destin, including all the saints throughout Okaloosa and Santa Rosa Counties: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me first say in all humility, I strive to remain conversant and capable in modern technology but have chosen what you call snail mail to convey my thoughts today. I say this not to judge or admonish or command, but my heart is troubled by the casual forms of communication that are common today. So often even the most faithful among you fail to include any formal or informal salutation either in emails or especially in texts, not even a "hi" or "hello" much less the typical "dear so-and-so." Might we wonder whether this implies just a little lack of regard or respect for the reader? Are those with whom we correspond not dear to us? Are none of them also children of God and companions with us on the road of life? Is our time so precious that we may overlook our common humanity with those to whom we address our words?

Still, I know how genuine your love is. I know you excel in everything – in faith, in sharing, in knowledge, and in eagerness. No wonder we love you so much. Your Blue Door Ministry and Bike Shop offer so much that is needed by the unhoused, the hungry, the lonely, and the afflicted, to say nothing of those in need of transportation on a limited budget. You worship with sincerity and longing for God. Your gathering in community after service to share sweets and savories is exemplary. Now we ask only that your loving and generous spirit carry over to your Church outside your walls and community.

Some time ago, I wrote to a young church community I had visited, urging them to contribute to what we then called the “Mother Church” in Jerusalem, which was struggling as it sought not only to organize, but also to provide a foundation and support for newly formed Christian communities. I wonder if we might compare that circumstance with your parish. Last week all your bishops and hundreds of delegates from throughout your Episcopal Church gathered in convention to do the business of the Church, both temporally and spiritually. As you know, every diocese pledges to support the work of the convention and wider church. And every individual parish and mission in turn supports the diocese in which it resides. So it seemed the proper moment to remind you of this vital element of your pledging and giving as a parish to your diocese and the corporate institution of the Episcopal Church.

And in that regard, we can only commend you for your efforts to fully fund your expected diocesan pledge, increasing your pledge and narrowing the gap every year.

We know the strain this puts on your budget. Yet, so may parishes struggle, but still provide beyond their means. So often it is not the well-off that provide most generously, but those whose budgets are strained beyond the limit. Our Jewish sisters and brothers on their feast of Purim must find someone poorer than they are and give them a gift. We have come to understand that the poor give more generously precisely because they know what it is like to be poor.

Christ, we might observe, also offers a compelling example of generosity. How could we forget that he consented to walk with us and to teach us and to die for us. Has any person ever matched this self-exhausting generosity? Christ showed us that the true gift is the gift of ourselves. Indeed, can any gift be real and genuine unless we give something of ourselves with it?

Let me remind you then of the high standards you have set for yourself. I can only encourage you to live at the height of your values and intensity of your eagerness to love and serve. How different would our world be if all of us conducted ourselves with the same righteous and excellence we aspire to in our hearts? Indeed, dare we say the tragedy of our lives is not the lack of our better impulses, but our utter failure to convert them to action?

Finally, let me remind you that, as we often hear today in other contexts, "What goes around, comes around." Our action or inaction has consequences. As I told the church in Corinth (2 Cor. 13-14):

For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has-- not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

I pointed that young church community to the words of Scripture. (Exodus 16:18):

The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.

Our prayer, therefore, is that all have enough.

So let us not forget that the corporate Church and diocese that you support with your pledge also are there to support you when you do not have enough. That is the intention of the Church, and that is what seems only fair.

Finally, my sisters and brothers in Christ, farewell, and as I often say (2 Cor. 13:11-13):

Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Your ever faithful apostle and servant,

Paul