

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 24, 2014
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm 138
Romans 11:33-36
Matthew 16:13-20

The following sermon was written and preached by Dr. Fred Craddock,
Professor of New Testament and Preaching Emeritus at Emory
University, on the Sunday following the death of his brother, Bill.

In the fall of the year, even after days grow short and the air crisp, I still go out on the patio alone at the close of the day. It usually takes only a few minutes to knit up the raveled sleeve, quietly fold it, and put it away. But those few minutes are necessary; everyone needs a time and a place for such things.

But this particular evening was different. I sat there remembering, trying to understand the painful distance between the day as I planned it and the day as it had been. The growing darkness was seeping into mind and heart, and I was as the night. Looking back on it, I know now that it was this evening on which the Idea came to me. But frankly I was in no mood to entertain it.

It was not really a new Idea, but neither was it old. It was just an Idea. And it returned the next evening. I was relaxed enough to play with it a little while before it went away. The following evening I spent more time playing with the Idea and feeding it. Needless to say, I grew attached to the Idea before long, and

then I had the fear that it belonged to one of the neighbors and that I would not be able to keep it. I went to each of the neighbors.

“Is this your idea?”

“No, it isn’t our idea.” I claimed it for myself and exercised an owner’s prerogative by giving it a name. I named it *Doxology*.

I took Doxology inside to our family supper table. Supper is family time, and conversation is usually reflection upon the day. If all are unusually quiet, I often ask, “What was the worst thing that happened today?”

John answers, “The school bell rang at 8:30.”

“Well, what was the best thing that happened?”

“It rang again at 3:30.”

Tongues are loosed and all of us – Laura, John, Nettie, and I – share our day. Supper is good time and pleasant, and the whole family agreed Doxology belonged at our table.

The next day Doxology went with me downtown for some routine errands. But somehow they did not seem so routine. We laughed at a child losing a race with an ice cream cone, his busy tongue unable to stop the flow down to his elbow. We studied the face of a tramp staring in a jewelry store window and wondered if he were remembering better days or hoping for better days. We spoke to the banker, standing with thumbs in vest before a large plate glass window, grinning as

one in possession of the keys of the kingdom. We were delighted by women shoppers clutching bundles and their skirts at blustery corners. It was good to have Doxology along.

But I had to make a stop at St. Mary's Hospital to see Betty. Betty was dying with cancer, and the gravity of my visit prompted me to leave Doxology in the car. Doxology insisted on going in and was not at all convinced by my reasons for considering it inappropriate to take Doxology into the room of a dying patient. I locked Doxology in the car.

Betty was awake and glad to see me. I awkwardly skirted the subject of death.

"It's alright," she said. "I know, and I have worked it through. God has blessed me with a wonderful family, good friends, and much happiness. I am grateful. I do not want to die, but I am not bitter." Before I left, it was she who had the prayer.

Back at the car, Doxology asked, "Should I have been there?"

"Yes, I'm sorry I did not understand."

Of course, Doxology went with the family on vacation. This summer we went to the beach down on the Gulf. What a good time! A swim before breakfast, a snooze in the afternoon sun, and a walk on the beach for shells in the evening. Doxology enjoyed watching the young people in dune buggies whiz by and spin

sand over on the old man half-buried beside his wife, who turned herself in the sun like a chicken being barbecued. It was fun to walk out into the waves. These waves would start toward us, high, angry, and threatening, but as they drew near, they began to giggle and fall down. By the time they reached us, they had rolled over, we scratched their soft undersides, and they ran laughing back into the sea.

There is no question: Doxology belongs on a vacation.

Too soon it is school time again. I return to seminary classes, explaining all the while to Doxology that really Doxology is unnecessary, superfluous at seminary. After all, do we not spend the day every day talking about God, reading about God, writing about God? We do not need Doxology when we are heavily engaged in theology.

I was leading a group of students in a study of Paul's Letter to the Romans. The class soon discovered, however, that in this weightiest and most influential of all Paul's letters, the argument was often interrupted by Doxology. Early in the letter, in the midst of a discussion of the spiritual state of all those who live out their lives without Bible or knowledge of Christ, Paul inserts a burst of praise to the "Creator who is blessed forever. Amen."

After a very lengthy treatment of the tragic situation concerning the Jews, from whom came the Christ but who had not believed in Him, Paul breaks off his argument suddenly and begins to sing:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Time and time again Paul breaks the line of thought with a doxological reservation, as though suddenly reminding himself of something. Why?

Probably because Paul is aware that the Doxology is most appropriate to his task as a theologian. Theology begins with words not *about* God but *to* God. People discern first what is sacred, and from there move to what is true and right and good. Worship does not interrupt theological study; theology grows out of worship. And we do not attach chapel services to seminary life in order to provide something extra; we worship because of what has already been provided. A mother does not put a ribbon in her daughter’s hair to make her pretty, but *because* she is.

But more especially, Doxology is appropriate for Paul’s own life, who he is. Who is Paul that he should write of the grand themes of creation, the history of salvation, and redemption in Jesus Christ? He is himself a creation of the very grace of which he speaks. He offers himself as Exhibit A in evidence of the effective love of God. *Why not break into song now and then?*

Nothing, in my opinion, could be more appropriate for any of us, whoever or wherever or however. Whether we spend our time at sticky café tables talking revolution or sit in calm indifference on suburban patios, Doxology is not out of place.

While on sabbatical in Germany a few years ago, I was taken by friends to a small hotel near Salzburg, Austria, where we had dinner and heard a young woman sing. She was Julie Rayne, a Judy Garland-type singer from London. Her songs were English, German, and American, and so many of my old favorites were included that I soon melted and ran down into the cracks of the floor. During her performance, Miss Rayne sang one number of an unfamiliar tune but very familiar words:

*I will lift up my eyes to the hills; from whence comes my help?
My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.*

What is going on here [I thought]? If entertainers move into the field of religion, some of us will soon be out of work. I asked to speak with Miss Rayne and she consented. My question: “Why, in the midst of popular songs, this song from Psalm 121?”

Her answer was that she had made a promise to God to include a song of praise in every performance. “If you knew what kind of person I was and what I was doing,” she said, “and what has happened since I gave my life to God, then you would know that Psalm 121 is the most appropriate song I could sing.”

Once in awhile we have a seminary student who gives it up. Not suddenly, but slowly. Zeal cools; faith weakens; appetite for Christian enterprise disappears, the springs dry up, the soul is parched, and you can see it in eyes grown dull and flat.

What happened? Did evil storm his citadel and take over? No.

Did much study drive him into doubt? No.

Did attractive alternatives to ministry turn his head? No.

Nothing quite so dramatic. He simply made the fatal error of assuming that spending so much time talking *about* God was adequate substitute for talking *with* God. He lost his Doxology, and died.

Is there ever a time or place when it is inappropriate to say, “For from him and through him and to him are all things – to him be glory forever, Amen”?

It was from the class on Romans that I was called to the phone. My oldest brother had just died. Heart attack. When stunned and hurt, get real busy to avoid thought. Call the wife. Get the kids out of school. Arrange for a colleague to take my classes. Cancel a speaking engagement. Stop the mail and the paper. Arrange for someone to feed the dog. “I think I packed the clothes we need,” the wife said as we threw luggage and our bodies into the car.

All night we drove, across two states, eyes pasted open against the windshield. Conversation was spasmodic, consisting of taking turns asking the

same questions over and over. No one pretended to have answers. When we drew near the town and the house, I searched my mind for a word, a first word to the widow. He was my brother, but he was her husband. I was still searching when we pulled into the driveway.

She came out to meet us, and as I opened the car door, still without that word, she broke the silence: **“I hope you brought Doxology.”**

No, I had not. I had not even thought of Doxology since the phone call. But the truth is now clear: ***If we ever lose our Doxology, we might as well be dead.***

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.