

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 27, 2017  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

Note: This sermon was preached by Dr. Fred Craddock on the Sunday following the death of his brother, Bill. Dr. Craddock was a seminary professor. The sermon grows out of reflection on today's epistle lesson to the Romans.

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, but those few minutes are necessary. Everyone needs a time and 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 the 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 a bit 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 is usually reflection upon the day. If all are unusually quiet, I often ask, “What the worst thing that happened today?”

[My son] John answers, “The school bell rang at 8:30.”

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

“It rang again at 3:30.”

Tongues are loosed and all of us – Laura, John, Nettie, and I – share our day. Supper is a 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 homeless man 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 who possessed the keys of the kingdom.

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 it 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 all right," 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 offered the prayer.

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

"Yes," I answered softly. "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 out to sea. There is no question: *Doxology* belongs on a vacation.

Too soon it is time for school again. I return to seminary classes, explaining all the while to *Doxology* that *Doxology* is unnecessary, even superfluous, at seminary. After all, do we not spend every day talking 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 and suddenly 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. (Rom. 11:33-36)*

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 *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.

More specifically, *Doxology* is appropriate for Paul's own life, for *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 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 never out of place.

Once in a while we have a seminarian who gives it up. Not suddenly but slowly. Zeal cools, faith weakens, appetite for Christian enterprises disappears. The soul is parched, and you can see it in the eyes grown dull.

What happened? Did evil storm his citadel and take over? 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 an adequate substitute for talking *with* God. He lost his *Doxology*, and he 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?*

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. Stop the paper and the mail. Arrange to have someone feed the dog.

“I think I packed the clothes we need,” my 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*.”

*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.

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