

“The King of Love”

Ephesians 3:14-21

First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest

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I suppose it is somewhat of an understatement to say that this year’s Thanksgiving celebrations will be a little different. As new infections from COVID-19 reach close to 200,000 a day, nearly every state in the nation is enacting stricter protocols to slow the spread of the virus, including urging all of us to remain at home with immediate family this week. It’s looking a lot like we won’t be humming, “Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go.” And under the circumstances, it seems a little strange to be singing, “We gather together,” unless we’re prepared to think about that in new, less physical ways. Perhaps we should sing, “We live-stream together,” or “To Grandmother’s house we Zoom” this year.

One thing that hasn’t changed is our need “to ask the Lord’s blessing,” because in a nation that is suffering from this pandemic more than any other, we all now have friends and family who have tested positive. Here at church, the Session has acted wisely to suspend in-person worship, even though we’ve had zero transmissions to date. It’s just the right thing to do. But it’s hard. Really hard. Human beings aren’t solitary creatures. We weren’t designed for a life of splendid isolation. We were designed for life together in the Lord.

This was especially true for the man we now refer to as St. Paul, author of much of the content of the New Testament. While himself unmarried and childless, Paul cherished a deep love for God’s people and was tireless in serving their spiritual and physical needs in Christ. He founded or enlarged at least six congregations, including the people of Colossae, Philippi, Thessalonika and Corinth, while championing a life-saving stewardship effort to feed the members of the mother-church in Jerusalem during a time of great famine in Palestine.

But now we find him at the end of his ministry, under house-arrest in the encampment of the Praetorian Guard just outside Rome, with no friends remaining other than Timothy and Luke. One would think that this would crush a man as constituted as Paul was to stand boldly in the concourses of his cosmopolitan world, proclaiming Jesus crucified and risen. Yet this was not the case. Instead, we find him composing his deepest and most heartfelt epistles, calculated to strengthen, comfort and inspire a fledgling church with courage, perseverance, and hope. What he did for them then—he does for us now, as we live out our own version of house-arrest, combatting this pandemic.

Listen to the words of this extraordinary prayer which forms the apogee of the entire epistle:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name...”

Like Jesus taught his disciples, Paul refers to the Maker of heaven and earth with the same intimacy, suggesting that the right to belong to a family is the birthright of every human being in the sight of God. Moreover, he seems to be suggesting that this arrangement will continue beyond this world: that heaven itself is filled with families from every race and nation; and where the King of Love, the Risen Christ himself, can still be heard saying, “Let the little children come to me.” In the vision of heaven contained in this prayer, there is no continuation for the cast-out or abandoned, the orphan, the widow,

or the stranger, for we will all be gathered together in unimaginable blessing, and no one will be left behind.

Listen to Paul's First Petition:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit..."

As we learn from his letters to the Romans and to the Corinthians, Paul understood human beings to be made up of two natures: one spiritual, reflecting the nature of God, and the other physical, reflecting the nature of the world we live in. The latter is subject to change and decay, but the former and more important part, the part which carries our character and will, is subject to renewal and recreation. His prayer is that this part of us would be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit—something that I have seen taking place in people who look to God no matter what is happening in their lives and no matter how heavy their burdens are. I have witnessed the life-giving response of the Father to Paul's prayer in people suffering from sickness or loss; people struggling with economic loss or addiction, and people fighting with despair. When we are ready to approach God with honesty and humility, strength is given—strength beyond self. The outward circumstances of our living may not change—but our inward condition does, with eternal consequences. This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians, "Even though our outward nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day...so we do not lose heart."

The Second Petition of this magnificent Prayer creates the conditions for the first:

"(I pray) that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith..."

The Apostolic Church envisioned Christ the King ruling from heaven at the right side of the Father, but Paul understood the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the Risen Christ interchangeably. Christ rules heaven and earth, yet he also promises to live in our hearts in mystic communion when we open the door to let him in. What greater peace is there than to know that we are never left to ourselves—in joy or in sorrow; in life or in death—when we ask Christ to stay with us. This is not something that we achieve. It is the outcome of our faith, which is itself a gift from God. With Christ within us, we can trust in what cannot be seen: the Road before us, and the Door opening to a heavenly Thanksgiving at its end.

"For we walk by faith and not by sight."

The Third Petition was strikingly illustrated for me when Deb and I visited the Light-scapes Exhibition at the Chicago Botanic Garden last week. As evening fell, we were greeted by two mighty trees at the Entrance on Lake-Cook Road, adorned with thousands of tiny white lights limning trunks, limbs and branches, from the earth to the sky. It must have taken weeks to do it, and the results were breathtaking, shining bright as Paul's prayer:

"As you are being rooted and grounded in love, I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, that you may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge..."

From a tiny sapling rooted in the love of family, our life grows up, reaching high, wide and deep, with countless others giving thanks and praise to God. As Deb and I walked hand-in-hand down pathways lined with hundreds of illuminated trees and surrounded by families with grandparents and children leaping about in joy, it made me think a little of what it might be like to walk beneath the trees which

line the River in the New Jerusalem—the Holy City of God. Which of you listening today would not want this for your children and for all children, whose ever they may be?

Paul's Fourth and final Petition embraces the first three as well:

"(I pray) that you may be filled with all the fullness of God..."

Our God is a God of abundance—and this Petition envisions a world where no child is left unloved or unsheltered, unfed or alone. What is God's fullness if not the fullness of his covenant-promise in Christ?

"I will be your God and you shall be my people..."

"I will not leave you orphaned..."

"Come to me, all you who carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest..."

"I have come that they may have life—and have it in abundance."

Friends, we may not be able to gather together this Thanksgiving in the usual ways, but we can indeed ask the Lord's blessings from the King of Love himself. Despite all evidence to the contrary, it is he who rules this world with truth and grace. His love will last forever.

So in lieu of sharing turkey and stuffing and gravy, let us share in this Prayer for our families this Thanksgiving--by cherishing them, by draping them with the twinkling lights of our affections, and by never taking them for granted. May we also extend both our thanks and our giving to all God's children: especially to the sick and the suffering, the lost and alone, and for families who don't look or speak like us—families who clamor for food at our gates.

As we are strengthened and built up in love, let our gratitude overflow in works of mercy, through the power of Christ to accomplish in our own living far more abundantly than all we could ever ask for or imagine.

And to God be the glory!

Amen.