

Thanksgiving 2020 (Colossians 2:6-7)

Thank you Bennett, for presenting our scripture text today. Our thoughts today are gathered around Thanksgiving which is coming up in a few days. As our video earlier noted, this is going to be an unusual—one might even say, unprecedented—holiday for us given how 2020 has played out so far. The pandemic has altered plans for gathering with family members and friends—our family gathering cancelled, perhaps yours did as well. Around our community and the nation at large, many families will have empty seats at the table, and some will spend the holiday in the hospital. Even if your circle of family and friends haven't experienced personal loss this year, there's still been lots of anxiety this year, and uncertainty still hangs in the air. Though Thanksgiving approaches, to many of us it won't feel much like Thanksgivings we've known, and we may not be much in a thanksgiving frame of mind.

Sometimes, in a situation like this, we're reminded of what Paul taught in 1 Thess. 5:16-18—"Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." And while this is true and has merit, it can feel like a velvet covered brick: do this regardless of your circumstances because it's God's will, and you don't want to go against God's will. So it comes across as a "grit your teeth," "stiff upper lip," kind of resolve that goes against the grain, but this is what Christians do, so get on with it. Being tongue-lashed in the service of producing thanks isn't what Paul had in mind, and I don't believe this is a particularly helpful approach.

What I do find helpful, and want to suggest today is the idea that thanksgiving—the frame of mind rather than the holiday itself—is an outcome rather than an objective. It's a result that arises from our pursuit of Christ as Paul notes in the passage Bennett read for us from Colossians. These couple of verses are a bit of a summary statement that acts as a transition from information to application, and these few words capture the essence of what's involved in following Christ.

"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord..." That's the basis of our confession of faith. We acknowledge Christ Jesus as Lord—in other words, as Ruler over all, and in particular as the One to whom we submit ourselves, the One whose direction for life we pledge to follow—so now, "continue to live in him..." meaning, allow Jesus' teaching and example to inform the way you live your life. Another way of putting this is to obey Jesus' teaching as you live. Obey is a sort of 4 letter word in our culture—our natural inclination to this, however mild it may be, is a soft challenge that says: make me! But note that it is the natural inclination—what the NT calls the flesh meaning that part of ourselves that is not yielded to the leading of Christ. Before we confess faith in Christ that covers the whole of our being. In Christ that speaks to the transformative process taking place through the work of the Holy Spirit within us to bring every part of ourselves into agreement with God's heart demonstrated in Christ. So living in Christ means bringing every part of ourselves into agreement with what Jesus taught as the best way to live in keeping with God's original design. Now this is a lifelong process, and we all of us in Christ are at different places in that, and parts of that process are easier for some than for others, which is why we're not to judge one another, but instead to encourage each other in that ongoing work. It's a daily process to which we agree on a daily basis. How does this progress in us?

Paul unpacks what it means to live in Christ in the next word: rooted, meaning rooted in Christ. The agricultural implication is intentional as it dovetails Christ's teaching: I am the vine, you are the branches. Paul shifts the metaphor just a bit when he calls for us to be rooted in Christ. Roots provide stability for a tree, they go deep and are hidden from view, and in some ways this highlights the hidden nature of this ongoing process—it is all internal for us as human beings, but the effects of a strong root structure can be seen in the result of a flourishing plant or a towering tree. Roots are the means for gaining nutrients and food—so the question for the Christ follower is: on what are you feeding? What is filling your heart? What is feeding your mind? What is forming your worldview? Steeped in the faith of Israel, Paul, perhaps, was recalling the opening verses of Psalm 1: Blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, on the one who meditates on this day and night—they are like a tree planted by streams

of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.” Are you feeding on Christ? Are you rooted in his teaching? Is he filling your heart—that is, directing your decisions? Are his teachings informing your thought? Do his teachings shape your worldview? You see, the deeper your roots, the stronger your bearing.

Paul continues by describing us built up in Christ—as your roots in Christ find his nourishment, you find yourself acquiring the character of his life—his beautiful life begins to bud and flower in yours. The internal work emerges in your external manner of life. His values become yours—his focus becomes yours. You begin to see the world around you as Christ sees it in all of its beauty and agony: the beauty resulting in praise, and the agony prompting response, which is where Paul goes next.

“You are strengthened in the faith as you were taught...” This is grace enabling you to put into practice service to others. Because you are being built up in Christ, because you are beginning to see the world as it is, because you see people in pain, or need, or victimized, or oppressed, you find within you the capability to reach out and touch the place of suffering, the wounds inflaming, and bring the balm of blessing, of opportunity, of release, of dignity, of wholeness, of abundance. And it need not be a cause as the larger problem, though that’s not exempt from this—but it shouldn’t likewise prevent you from reaching out to the one right in front of you. Strength comes from training and exercise—your response bolstered by the confidence you have in the sufficiency of Christ to provide exactly what you need in the moment of service strengthens you as a follower of Christ for your confidence builds as you respond.

All of this—living in Christ by being rooted and built up in him, being strengthened in the faith—all of this tangible experience that develops as your manner of life comes into agreement with the way of living Christ taught will result in your overflowing with thankfulness—gratitude and thanksgiving will cascade from your life and it will take your breath away. On sabbatical a few years ago, Teresa and I visited Niagra Falls. I’ve seen pictures of it before, even video clips, but nothing compares to standing right next to them seeing the incredible volume of water cascading over the falls and hearing their roar. It’s absolutely stunning. But you know, the falls would not exist apart from the Niagra river feeding them. The steady flow of the river unleashes the majesty of the falls cascading over the cliffs. Your obedience to Christ, your agreement with Christ about how to live life is the steady river that feeds thankfulness cascading out of you. Jesus spoke about this in John 7—“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within them.” And then John helpfully adds, “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive...” The Spirit’s flow in your life leads you to live into the beauty of Christ’s life alive in you, and the outcome of reflecting on that process causes thanksgiving to cascade from your lips. While we certainly thank God for what we have received, the bulk of our thanks surrounds the realization of who we’ve become, who we are in Christ and how that is experienced in the life we get to live.

Perhaps in the quietness of what Thanksgiving—the holiday—will likely be for you this year, you will find a place for gratitude somewhere in these reflections:

My standing before God is not based on my righteousness, but Christ’s;
My brokenness does not disqualify me for the Kingdom of God—it is its’ prerequisite;
My weakness creates the opportunity for God’s strength to prevail;
My insecurities are swept up in the promises I have from God;
My sin is overwhelmed by God’s grace;
My imperfections are overshadowed by God’s love for me;
My incomprehension recedes as God proves faithful;
My fears are calmed in the awareness of Christ’s presence;
My inabilities find facility through the Holy Spirit’s power and direction;
My failures are pre-supposed and redeemed by Christ’s forgiveness;
My temporary physical life has a secure eternal future through God’s power;
My suffering gains meaning as God invites trust for its outcome;
My loneliness is overcome in the company of Christ’s body;

My scarcity vanishes in the overflow of God's generosity.

Perhaps in the intimacy of this Thanksgiving, you can share with those in your household how you are experiencing the river of God's Spirit flowing in your life, how you have seen Christ shaping your life, how you've been strengthened. And you can follow this up with sharing how you've seen this taking place in the lives of those closest to you—the ones sitting at table with you. Then in cascades of thanksgiving, you can together express your thanks to the God who loves you and sustains you. In so doing, you might well discover what Ann Voskamp suggests: In Christ, Thanksgiving is more than a holiday—In Christ, thanksgiving is all of our days. AMEN