

Colossians 1: 11-17 "Death of Thanksgiving" Rev. Janet Chapman 11/20/22

Not many years ago, the flagship Macy's store in New York made the infamous decision to try opening its doors to shoppers at 8:00 pm on Thanksgiving Day. It shook the nation as the same store that produced the nationally televised Thanksgiving Day parade, watched by millions, was being blamed for ruining the holiday. Time Magazine reported that people were denouncing the move as "greedy, misguided and unfair to the employees being forced to work on a day traditionally reserved for family." One person wrote to the New York Times, "Dear Editor, please write an obituary because I think this death needs to be acknowledged – it is the death of Thanksgiving." But wait a minute – other stores were guilty as well – Walmart, Target, Shopko and others all launched deals on Thanksgiving day starting as early as 4:00 in the afternoon and it seemed Macy's was trying just to keep up. However, if no one wanted to shop on Thanksgiving, then no stores would be open. Possibly the true Thanksgiving-killer is the one who leaves the table and heads to the mall. Maybe this is an opportunity to take the pulse on Thanksgiving in both church and culture today. How is thanksgiving doing, not just the day called Thanksgiving, but the act of giving thanks itself? Is it deceased, or has its death been greatly exaggerated? Is the act of expressing appreciation, of saying thank you, dead or does it just need a booster?

One of my favorite comic strips, Peanuts, depicts Lucy asking Charlie Brown for help with her homework. "I'll be eternally grateful," she promises. "Fair enough. I've never had anyone be eternally grateful before," replied Charlie. "Just subtract four from ten to get how many apples the farmer had left." Lucy says, "That's it? That's all there was to it – I have to be eternally grateful for that? I was robbed! I can't be eternally grateful for this, it was too easy!" With his blank stare, Charlie replies, "Well, whatever you think is fair." "How about if I just say 'thanks, bro?'" she responded. As Charlie leaves to go outside, he runs into Linus. "Where have you been, Charlie Brown?" he asks. "Helping Lucy with her homework." Linus asks, "Did she appreciate it?" Charlie answers, "Yeah, I guess so, but at greatly reduced prices." Isn't that how it is sometimes – our gratitude is half-hearted, greatly reduced based on our assessment of the quantitative value of the gift. In order for thanksgiving to survive, maybe we need to work a bit harder to take mathematics out of the equation.

Practicing gratitude is under attack whenever we base our gratefulness upon the gift's price tag. The values of our faith and the values of our culture butt heads against each other and it is a toss-up as to which is winning. Henry Brinton reminds us that this was the case for the people in a community along the main roadway in Asia Minor, what is now modern Turkey, to whom our biblical letter is written. Paul was writing to a small group of Christians in Colossae who were being pulled between the values of their faith and culture. In chapter 2, shortly after our text for today, Paul warns them, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ." We understand that tendency when we try to spend ourselves out of economic troubles, when we succumb to the empty deceit of a sales pitch, when we turn the holidays into excessive consumption. The elemental spirits of the universe lure us away from Christ, the One in whom all things are held together. So Paul encourages us to "endure everything with patience" because our joy comes from the gifts of God, whose values are limitless, immeasurable. Take note here that Paul isn't assuming that we will show gratitude only when everything is perfect. Instead, he knows there will be much hardship to endure at the same time we are giving thanks. Holding thanksgiving and hardship together is a spiritual challenge. We struggle to give thanks after the death of a spouse. We try to be grateful when a child is sick. We do our best to count our blessings when we lose a job, fail a class, suffer an injury, or experience a crushing disappointment. Fortunately, folks often find a way to do this. In on-the-street interviews on Thanksgiving day, people rarely talk about the material gifts but instead, mention the gifts of God that sustain them through the struggles: children, friends, church, partners, good health, kindness, generosity, knowledge, and so on. Former Archbishop of San Francisco, George Niederauer adds to the list with, "God's gifts of artistry, imagination and creativity; God's gifts of dedication, fidelity, and perseverance; God's gifts of strength, acumen, and skill." None of these gifts are available at Macy's, on Thanksgiving or any other time.

In Paul's letter, there is no expectation that we ignore or deny our struggles, that we pretend everything is ok. Instead, we are reminded that God will rescue us in the rough times, God will lead us to the light when the powers of darkness have taken hold. God makes

it possible for us to live through the hardships, making us strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, so that we may share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. Next week, we begin a season of Advent in which this journey will become even more prevalent. In the darkness that surrounds us, we remember that no matter how many times we stumble, Christ will be present to pick us up in one form or another.

M. Scott Peck tells a story called *The Rabbi's Gift* about a monastery that has fallen on hard times. Once a great order of monks, it had lost all its branch houses and now had only five monks left, all over the age of 70. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery, there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for respite and prayer. Through their many years of meditation, the old monks had become a bit psychic and always knew when the rabbi was at the hut. "The rabbi is in the woods," they would whisper to each other. As the abbot of the monastery agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to go visit the rabbi to see if he had some advice that might save the monastery? The rabbi welcomed the abbot, but when he explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue to give thanks to God anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. As the abbot prepared to leave he said, "It has been wonderful that we should meet but I have failed. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you." When the abbot returned to the monastery, he said, "The rabbi couldn't help, so we just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he said was something cryptic about the Messiah being one of us. I don't know what he meant." In the days, weeks and months to come, the old monks pondered this and questioned whether he possibly meant one of the monks there at the monastery was the Messiah? If that was the case, which one? Maybe he meant Father Abbot, for he had been their leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, maybe it was Brother Thomas, certainly he was a holy man of light. But then he could have meant Brother Elred? Elred gets crotchety at times and was a thorn in people's sides, but then again,

he was almost always right. Maybe the rabbi meant Brother Phillip, so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he had a gift for somehow always being there when you needed him. Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me, each of them thought to himself. I'm just an ordinary person... yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you O God, could I? As they contemplated the manner, the old monks began to treat each other differently, with extraordinary respect on the off-chance that one among them might be the Messiah. On the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Because the monastery sat in a beautiful spot in the woods, people regularly visited for picnics, hiking, and occasionally to enter the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they began to sense this changing aura of extraordinary respect and gratitude that surrounded the old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of that place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring friends to show them this special place, and their friends brought friends. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and gratitude in God's realm.

So I ask you again, "Is Thanksgiving dead?" The reality is Macy's won't be open this Thanksgiving for the 3rd year in a row. But that isn't why Thanksgiving isn't dead – the practice of giving thanks will never die as long as the Messiah is among us... in you, in me, regardless of when the stores open their doors. The Messiah is before all things, and in the Messiah, all things are held together, so let us always and forevermore joyfully give thanks!