

***“And Be Thankful” | Colossians 3:12-17***  
***Rev. Ellen Dawson | November 18, 2018***  
***FOX CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH***

12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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This week, we will gather for Thanksgiving - enjoying food, football, and time with friends and family. For many of us, the table at Thanksgiving will look the way it has for many years, with familiar faces and everyone’s favorite dishes. For some of us, the table will look a bit different -- perhaps you’ll be traveling to someone else’s home for the first time in years; perhaps the kids have grown and will be away with their in-laws; perhaps there will be new faces; perhaps a loved one has passed away leaving an empty seat and fond memories.

No matter what your table will look like, Thanksgiving is a holiday that is centered around the table. It began as a local celebration of the harvest among the first settlers. During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress recommended a day be set aside for Thanksgiving and Praise. Days of Thanksgiving were again set aside under President Washington, Adams, and Madison, But it was under President Lincoln, in the middle of the Civil War, that he made a proclamation for a National day of Thanksgiving. His proclamation states,

“I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. ... and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.”

Thanksgiving began as a celebration around the table, and it continues to be that for us. However, it was also established as a time to praise God, to show repentance, and to care for those who are less fortunate than us. Lincoln calls us to restoration, peace, harmony, tranquility and union.

In the midst of the family traditions, Black Friday deals and pumpkin pies, Thanksgiving can also be about such things. As we gather around the table, and as we gather as a body of Christ, let's consider how a time of gratitude also compels us to peace, unity, and forgiveness.

For the people living in Colossae, peace, unity, and forgiveness were at the heart of what the apostle Paul wanted to teach them through his letter, written around 62 A.D. Paul had never visited this prosperous city known mostly for its unique purple dyes and flourishing wool trade. Colossae was also known for its diversity of people, cultures, and religions.

At this time in history, the entire province of Asia had been evangelized, so its inhabitants, consisting of Jews and Greeks, had heard about Jesus Christ. So the church had been established, but it faced unique challenges. The challenges were philosophical and theological -- as the followers of Christ were being exposed to false teachings, coming from all angles.

You had the Gnostics, who didn't believe in God as the creator and believed Christ was actually a creature in a long line of creations. Paul of course argued Christ's identity as the Son of God and the firstborn of creation. He states "all things have been created through him and for him."

Then you had the Greeks, who believed in pantheism, which is the doctrine or view that God is the transcendent reality of which the material universe and human beings are only manifestations. Paul, in this letter, reminds the Christians that God is the creator and Father of all things - He is the Lord, who "makes us alive together with him."

And, on top of that, the Colossian Christians were influenced by oriental astrologers, the Greek stoics, and even angel cults. So in this letter, considered the first of his apologetic writings, or a defense of the faith, Paul had to make sure the message of the Gospel was loud and clear.

What we see in today's passage, in the third chapter, is where Paul reminds these followers that they are God's chosen -- chosen for a new life in Christ -- chosen to be one body, working together.

But how, how could they possibly work together, live together, and worship together with all of these sacred traditions, false teachings, and cultural pressures? Surely there had been disagreements among them. What was it going to take for them to finally get on the same page?

You see, for Paul, theology was a matter of life and death, not an intellectual game. He knew that the people of Colossae had to move away from their culturally-influenced arguments and focus on the truth -- the truth of Christ's relationship to God, Christ's role as a revealer and redeemer, Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. The disagreements had to stop, and these Colossian Christians had to come together as a church community. Sounds like we could learn from them, don't you think?

That was going to take work. And Paul gives them a step by step, domino-effect way to go about this work. It begins with compassion. Paul instructs them to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Once they did that they could move to the next phase - forgiveness - forgiving as the Lord forgave them. With forgiveness comes love, and with love, unity.

I think it's clear that forgiveness is what is at the heart of Paul's message. It has to happen for harmony to emerge.

Forgiveness isn't easy. It's especially not easy when someone has caused you pain or has created a difficult situation in your life. However, if you truly want reconciliation, harmony, and unity, just look at the steps Paul presents here. We are taught to start with compassion. Bring in patience and humility. And, with the wisdom of the Lord on your side, forgiveness can happen next.

For us, here in the church, we can also consider that Thanksgiving is a holiday that is celebrated at the table. And we, in the church, have a table for communion - a table that is set with the Lord's Supper, where all are invited to come and receive the bread and the cup, as symbols of Christ's body and blood - reminders of his death on the cross for our forgiveness. In the Presbyterian Church, we believe, "Reconciliation with Christ compels reconciliation with one another. Coming to the Lord's Table the faithful are actively to seek reconciliation in every instance of conflict or division between them and their neighbors." That's right! Communion is also a time of reconciliation - a time to consider God's forgiveness and the forgiveness we too need to live out in our own lives.

Brothers and sisters, when forgiveness happens, we heal, and so does the world. For centuries, great minds and artists have sung the praises of the practice of forgiveness, and now science seems to have caught up with what the soulful have long suspected: forgiveness is good for *us* -- mentally, physically, spiritually. When we forgive, we add light to the darkness. Just like when President Lincoln called for a time of Thanksgiving in the midst of war and turmoil - when we live lives full of forgiveness, we become catalysts for restoration, reconciliation, peace, and unity.

So this Thanksgiving, you are invited to be thankful for all the things that come to mind - for family, for friends, for a bountiful feast and for the blessings you see every day. But this passage reminds us to be thankful for forgiveness. For our forgiveness given, forgiveness received. For the forgiveness given through Christ, as a free gift of God's grace.