

Reasons for the Season

Colossians 1:11-20

A Sunday School teacher asked her class to make “thank you” lists. One little boy wrote down that he was thankful for his glasses. The teacher was impressed by that. After all, most children don’t care for having to wear them. Here, she thought, was a young man mature enough to appreciate what wearing glasses did for him. “Johnny,” she said, “I see that you put your glasses down at the head of the list of things for which you are thankful. Is there any special reason?” Johnny answered, “Yes ma’am. My glasses keep the other boys from hitting me and the girls from kissing me.”

That boy’s reasons for his list aside, it would be a very helpful spiritual exercise for all of us to make just such a list. Today, put fingers to keypad, or go old-school and take pen to paper, and list those things for which you are most thankful. We all have reasons to give thanks this Thanksgiving season and recounting them will help inspire our celebrations.

In our Epistle lesson from Paul’s letter to the Colossians this morning, Paul does just that, and gives six reasons for the season. Now, I could bring up and detail all of them right now in this sermon. But, as a shorter sermon would be another reason for which to be thankful, I’ll only mention two. And, the first reason for thankfulness this season is this: the birth of God into our lives. It’s called the Incarnation. Here’s what Paul writes about it. “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation...” Without the incarnation, that is, God becoming human flesh and blood, and, in Jesus, embracing the world to himself, we would not know how far the love of God will go to love you and me. How far will God’s love go to embrace you and me? It’s like this. On a Pacific island, a young boy came to his new priest’s side and said to her, “I love you and I want you to have this. He pulled

from a straw basket the most beautiful shell the priest had ever seen. As she admired its beauty, she recognized it as a special shell only found on the far side of the island, a half day's walk from the village, and another half-day walk back. When she pointed this out to the boy, he smiled and said, "The long walk is part of the gift."

Central to everything we believe as Christians is this truth; that God loved the world so much that he made a long walk to come from where he was to where we are; that God became human flesh and blood and dwelled among us in Jesus. That is the incarnation. God became one of us in order to let us know that we are loved. That is the first reason for which you and I can give thanks today. Indeed, for the next seven weeks, through Advent, and the Twelve Days of Christmas up to Epiphany, we'll be giving thanks for this one.

And, here's the other reason I'll mention this morning for the season of Thanksgiving: self-sacrificing love; Christ's love for us and the love he makes possible in us for each other. Paul writes, "And through him to draw to himself all things, whether on earth or in Heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Because Christ sacrificed himself for us, and thus connected us to God's love, that same self-sacrificing love can now flow through us to others.

Here's an example of what I mean. Dr. Claude H. Barlow was a missionary to China. The people he came to serve and to show God's love, despite being initially suspicious of this foreigner among them, came to revere him. That reverence was because they knew his love would sacrifice anything for them. They saw that when a deadly plague broke out. No one had a cure. No one even knew what it was. There were no research laboratories for this disease, so Dr. Barlow conducted his own research. He studied the disease, filling a notebook with his observations. He then secured a vial of the deadly bacteria and sailed for the United States. Before he arrived, though, he injected the

contents of the vial into his own body. Then he went to Johns Hopkins University Hospital to be observed.

Claude Barlow was near death now. He allowed his old professors at Johns Hopkins to use him for experimentation. A cure was found, which a fully recovered Claude Barlow took back to China with him. His efforts saved countless lives. When asked about the experience, Dr. Barlow replied, "Anyone would have done the same thing. I just had the chance to offer my body."

I doubt that just anyone would have done that. Only a person with a very special kind of love in his or her heart would risk that kind of self-sacrifice. It is that kind of love proceeding from the heart of God, flowing through us to others, that holds this world together. Without that love we are all orphans in a strange and hostile universe. But that love does exist. It exists in this church and in your church, and it exists among people around this earth who have been encountered by God's love in Jesus. That kind of self-sacrificing love is what God has given to you and me. Now, we, giving it in turn to each other, in his name, is what being his sons and daughters in the family of God is all about. That love is the other reason for this season to mention this morning.

There we have it: two great reasons for the Thanksgiving Season: The Incarnation, and Christ's self-sacrificing love. Put them at the top of your Thank You List today. So, today, get ready: Feast! Enjoy! But above all; Give Thanks!