

In Christ All Things Hold Together

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Colossians 1:11-20

The great Jewish rabbi and author Abraham Heschel wrote, *If our only prayer were thank you, O God, it would be enough.* Heschel understood that God's grace is lavished upon us to such degree that we can't possibly "return" thanks adequately, even if we celebrated Thanksgiving every day. Paraphrasing that idea slightly, let me begin by saying that if my only sermon today were "Thank you, Fairmount," it would be enough. Thank you for your faith, your commitment to Christ's church and to this congregation. Thank you for the gifts you share of time, talent, and treasure. Thank you for the joyous privilege of serving as your pastor. Thank you for friendship given and received, and for the many acts of deep caring I witness so often. Thank you, each one, for *you*-for the beloved person you are.

If my only sermon were "Thank you, Fairmount," it would be enough. But... it isn't my only sermon today. Our flawed language describes preaching as the act of a preacher delivering a sermon to the congregation. In reality, the preacher and congregation create the sermon together, and present it to almighty God. Our life together as pastor and congregation prompts great gratitude in me and hopefully in you, but it is rightly directed to the source of every good gift, the God of grace and glory whom alone we worship and serve. So my thanks to you is heartfelt; the point of the sermon is to gather the varied aspects of our lives, relationships, work and play, service and struggle, pain and pleasure, and present them to God as our thanksgiving offering.

The morning Scripture text contains a hymn of thanksgiving, what biblical scholars believe may have been used liturgically in the early church. It may sound strange to our contemporary ears, because there is not a word of thanks for the temporal blessings of life: for food, for family, for health, for freedom—all those gifts for which we'll be expressing gratitude on Thursday before diving into turkey and all the trimmings. Instead, the apostle aims higher, to the One from Whom all blessings flow. Curiously, his perspective extends far beyond those obvious blessings, to include suffering, loss, even death itself—which is to say, real human life. We come—everyone of us—to this Thanksgiving season with wounds and doubts and broken, unhealed places in our lives and relationships.

Our country has been through a bruising campaign season that deeply divided us. The war in Iraq rages on. Our city faces enormous economic challenges, from job loss and brain drain, to chronic poverty, failing schools, hungry children. Our own community has recently been singled by violence and resultant fear. How do we say “thanks” in the face of all of this? And to whom? Let us listen for God’s Word in the reading from the letter to the Colossians, in the first chapter at the eleventh verse. [Colossians 1:11-20]

William Butler Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*, penned in the early part of the twentieth century, sounds uncannily accurate about life in the 21st century:

*... Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. . . .*

*[www.poets.org, the website of The Academy
of American Poets]*

The post-modern world we inhabit contributes to the persistent feeling that things are falling apart, that the familiar anchors that hold society together—be they moral, religious, civil or otherwise—have been shaken loose from their moorings, and we are adrift. Much of the rhetoric from the recent campaign seemed to capitalize on this perception, and the theme resonated with voters. Not long ago I was at a shower for a young couple expecting their first child. All the guests had been asked to write down words of wisdom for the new parents. Among the advice about sleep deprivation and diaper services, came this one: *Pray without ceasing—it’s a rough world out there!*

Because it is a rough world out there, we need a strong gospel. Our text is all of that, a stirring affirmation of a cosmic Christ, the visible image of the invisible God, the “firstborn” of all creation. Looking at the lines that constitute the “hymn” part of the passage, Christ is described as the transcendent ruler of all—all things have been created through him and for him. And yet the reference to his “making peace through the blood of his cross” is a potent reminder that this heavenly ruler came to earth. His life culminated in a violent, physical death. It is these twin realities that constitute good news for God’s people. Jesus Christ is both divine savior and human brother, present at the dawn of creation, yet fully immersed in human experience, including death. The portrait Paul paints reveals God with a recognizable face; a deity at home in everyday life.

...which is the reason we can "joyfully give thanks," in every circumstance. At the heart of creation is the God who is able to save us, to liberate us from oblivion, from cynicism and despair, from the power of evil. It is not insignificant that the epistle writer chose the language of rescue to describe God's saving grace. We cannot save ourselves. Not with all the powers of our considerable intellect, not with science, not with technology, not with wealth or any other human thing. Christ alone frees us from captivity to inhabit the kingdom of light and peace.

It is in that light that we see the power of darkness as contingent; powerful, yes—the cross shows that. But not the final outcome; not the victor. The victory belongs to Christ in whom "all things hold together." A reliable center; one that will be there come what may. Who even now, is working to reconcile all the broken things, the estranged people, the ravaged earth.

That's why we need not feel paralyzed by the rough world out there. That's why we need not feel daunted by problems in society or in the church, or become cynical or despairing. That's why we keep on working for justice for the poor, supporting peacemaking efforts, building a youth center in our community. Christ holds all things together in a way we never could alone.

The rabbi I quoted at the beginning of this sermon, Abraham Heschel, suffered a heart attack from which he never fully recovered. A friend who visited him in the hospital found him weak and barely able to talk. "Sam," he whispered, "when I regained consciousness, my first feeling was not despair and anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I have lived...I have seen so many miracles." Friends, if our only prayer were "thank you, O God" it would be enough. Thank you, O God. Thank you, Thank you!

**TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S
ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER
FOREVER. AMEN.**

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