

By Deb Richardson-Moore

November 24, 2019

Christ the King Sunday

Colossians 1: 11-20

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, We look to you for guidance in our study of Scripture. Make our interpretation ring with truth and authenticity. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

For the Holidays

Elementary school seems to be the time when we know the most about the first Thanksgiving. After that, our knowledge gets a little hazy.

Pilgrims, Indians, corn, something, something, something.

Twenty years ago, our family vacationed in Boston and Cape Cod. While we were on the Massachusetts mainland, we stopped to see Plymouth Rock, which is a very little rock surrounded by a very big fence.

Then we drove out on the cape for a week. One day we drove all the way to Provincetown, which is the very northernmost tip of Cape Cod. And as we were walking around, we saw some steep steps with a sign saying *Pilgrim Monument*.

I didn't remember the Pilgrims being in Provincetown, so we walked up those steps. Sure enough, there was a sign with the names of all the people who had sailed on the Mayflower. This was the spot where the Pilgrims first landed.

Out in the nearby harbor was the spot where the men from the ship – both Pilgrims seeking religious freedom and the so-called “strangers” along for the ride -- signed the Mayflower Compact. They declared that they were all “straightly tied to all care of each other’s good and of the whole by everyone.”

But Provincetown is far north and it hangs way out into the Atlantic where it is totally exposed. It was so cold, so inhospitable, in fact, that after a few weeks, the Pilgrims got back on their ship and sailed across the harbor to the more protected mainland, to the place we know as Plymouth.

It was late autumn of 1620. And while Plymouth might have been a little more hospitable than Provincetown, the Mayflower had still sailed far north of its intended landing in Virginia, the more *reasonable* part of the East coast.

The Pilgrims lived for much of that first harsh winter on the ship, suffering from scurvy, exposure and contagious diseases. Before the end of that first winter, 47 of the original 99 settlers were dead.

In March, the survivors ventured out and met native Americans. One of the natives, Squanto, had been captured and enslaved by the English, so he knew the English language.

Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to grow corn, get sap from maple trees, catch fish, avoid poisonous plants, and perhaps most importantly, forge an alliance with the local native American tribe.

When the Pilgrims' first corn harvest proved successful, Governor William Bradford organized a celebratory feast and invited their Native American allies, including the tribal chief Massasoit. That three-day feast is remembered as America's first Thanksgiving.

It probably wasn't the first. There were earlier Thanksgiving-style feasts celebrated in Canada and Florida and even Jamestown, Virginia. But the one in Plymouth is the one that our schoolchildren learn about, the one re-created with Pilgrim buckles and Indian head feathers.

Two grim and hard years later, the Pilgrims were emerging from a drought. Much-needed rains came. Captain Miles Standish arrived with staples. The Pilgrims got word that a Dutch supply ship was on its way.

They held another Thanksgiving, and the second one probably contained more of a religious element. The Pilgrims thanked God for this good turn of events.

But the real idea of thanksgiving, of giving thanks to God, goes back much farther than 17th Century American colonists. For the Pilgrims were merely reading their Scriptures.

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.” That’s Psalm 107:1.

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.” That’s Psalm 100.

“It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High...” Psalm 92.

The psalms are absolutely bursting with praise to the God who created, sustained and redeemed us. **“I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart....”** Psalm 138.

The doxology we sing every week states the same thing: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” It is a statement of gratitude that we build into our weekly worship. Tandy speaks of gratitude when she introduces our offering.

It is that gratitude that should lead us into Monday, with the Gratefull Greenville feast downtown. And into Thursday, the day we know as Thanksgiving.

You know, it is easy to lament the loss of meaning in our modern holidays – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter. But that really doesn't get us anywhere.

For we have the choice of how we will celebrate these holidays. We have the choice of what we will do and not do, what we will eat and not eat, what we will spend and not spend.

Eight years ago, Vince and I had the entire first floor of our house renovated during November and December. New hardwood floors. The kitchen gutted. Every single appliance and piece of furniture moved out.

Every night, we huddled around a TV upstairs like little mice, eating potato chips and Fig Newtons out of a cardboard box.

So at our house that year, there was no Thanksgiving dinner, no Christmas tree, no Christmas lights, no stockings, no cooking, no decorating. And you know what? The police weren't called in. The sky didn't fall. The family didn't splinter.

I just wish I could come up with another renovation this season.

No, even better, I want to make some decisions about what we will do and not do, what traditions are worth keeping and what can be thrown out. What goes to the heart of the holidays, and what has been thrust upon us by advertisers?

Last month, we invited all the faith leaders of Greenville County to come here for breakfast so we could tell them about Church Street Place at Poe Mill. As most of you know, that's a permanent supportive housing project that will have 36 units for chronically homeless people. The site is about a mile west of here. Our parishioner Jim Carroll is head of the Searchlight fundraising arm of that project.

Well, at breakfast that morning, we shared two ways churches might raise money for it.

Like us, with simple envelopes in the pew racks.

Or more aggressively, like our partner Advent United Methodist once did. Advent is a church filled with young families, way out on Woodruff Road. A couple of years ago, Advent's pastors challenged the congregation to make their traditional Christmas Eve offering a gift to affordable housing.

Now this was a serious commitment because the Christmas Eve offering represented a big chunk of Advent's budget.

The pastors suggested that whatever people were going to spend on Christmas, they give that much to this special offering. The congregation got very excited about the challenge. They talked and planned and had family discussions about how to allot their holiday spending.

When Christmas Eve rolled around, the congregation gave \$265,000 in a single evening. Even the pastors were stunned. They then gave the money to a partner agency to build and renovate several houses.

Just as amazing, when the church's own budget year ended, members had given enough to surpass the church's needs as well.

Generosity, it seemed, beget generosity.

Like the writers of the Mayflower Compact, members of their community were "straightly tied to all care of each other's good...."

We don't have to keep doing holidays the same way we've always done them. We don't have to overspend, overindulge, overeat, over-stimulate ... just because that's the way we've always done it.

This week let's not make Thanksgiving about the perfect turkey, the perfect pumpkin pie, the perfect centerpiece, the perfect table.

Let's make it about giving thanks to our perfect Lord.

Which brings us to our Scripture passage this morning, from Paul's letter to his friends at Colossae. If you'd like to read along, we are reading from

Colossians 1: 11-20.

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²*giving thanks* to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This letter to the Colossians is perhaps our most elevated view of Christ in all of Scripture. It is fitting for Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the liturgical year.

After reading about the earthly Jesus all year – from his birth to his teachings to his healings to his crucifixion and death – we now come to his enduring identity: Dwelling place for the fullness of God.

He is a dwelling place for the fullness of God.

Paul describes Jesus in the most exalted of terms – **“image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... (one who is) before all things ... head of the body ... first place in everything. ... (A)ll things have been created through him and for him.”**

We are left only to give thanks that we have been invited to join this King.

We are left only to give thanks to the God who **“rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son....”**

I think when we make that connection – that we serve a mighty God who has invited us to join the One who forgives us, who sustains us, who redeems us – then we might approach the holiday season in a more meaningful way.

We might approach it with humility, with reverence, with thanksgiving, with mercy and generosity. Not generosity regarding shiny new gadgets, but generosity of spirit, a recognition of the frailty and fragility of life among us.

You know they say that a mother is only as happy as her unhappiest child.

If we are truly “tied to all care of each other’s good,” that caring, that empathy, will extend to all our neighbors.

Just this week I received an email from a parishioner who lost her son in 2018. She had been feeling unexpectedly low, and had just realized that it was probably the approach of the holidays that triggered it.

We all know people who are grieving, who are lonely, who are ill, who are hurting, who are homeless this season. There can be joy in the reaching out, joy in the inclusion.

That’s the reason we will make such a big deal about decorating the sanctuary and the dining hall this week: We want those without a home to decorate for Christmas to make this their home for Christmas.

To make this their home even as we fend off the relentless pounding of holiday excess.

At a New Jersey country club recently, a waiter spilled red wine on a patron's \$30,000 Hermes Kelly purse. It was just ruined!

So now the woman is suing the country club.

I think the judge should convict her – of having a \$30,000 purse.

We don't have to go *that* crazy to lose the meaning of our holidays. We can lose the meaning for a lot less. We can lose the meaning by being so consumed with creating the perfect holiday that we forget to invite our perfect Lord.

Remember what our ancestors said about the Mayflower Compact? They declared that all those people facing the cold and starvation and disease of a brutal Massachusetts winter were "straightly tied to all care of each other's good."

May it be so with us this Thanksgiving week.

Amen.