Colossians 1:3-14 The Reason for the Season

Despite the title, the sermon today is not really a Christmas sermon, I just wanted to beat the Christmas rush, even if I know that I’m already late: Black Friday is past, after all, and you may have fought through the crowds this weekend. But the title is a statement you will hear several times this month, I’m sure; “The reason for the season,” you’ll see it on bumper stickers and on church marquees. You’ll see and hear lots of holiday slogans. A few years ago, I remember, First Methodist had a saying on its sign, “Thanksgiving is good, but thanks living is better.” That is a good sentiment, and appropriate for today, because this is a thanksgiving sermon.

Now, we just celebrated the Community Thanksgiving Service last Sunday night; we have collected food throughout November for the Helping Hands food drive. We’ve had our Thanksgiving feasts, with family coming in, or perhaps some of us traveling to the homes of other family; school has been dismissed for a couple of days. We have had football—more than enough, don’t you think? The weather has changed, and then changed again—last week was a bit uncomfortable, but then no one wants a hot Thanksgiving. It just feels like the change of seasons, and so many things to do and enjoy and participate in—just in the last few days—and
so much still to do and enjoy for the remainder of the holidays; so many things to think about, and maybe, to wish for; so, I want to ask, what are you thankful for?

This sermon text is not about Thanksgiving, the holiday, but it is about giving thanks, as a lifestyle. This little letter to the Colossians is filled with instructions for gratitude, coming to its fullest expression in chapter 3, verses 15-17, where the Apostle writes:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were called in the one body.  And be thankful.  Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns with thankfulness in your hearts to God.  And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Thanksgiving is an attitude, a manner of living that is closely aligned with spiritual attributes like compassion and meekness and humility and kindness, patience and forgiveness; it would be difficult indeed to be truly thankful to God and yet live with a haughty attitude, with pride or greed or anger.  Thanksgiving stands over against our own feelings of self-importance or a sense of deserving; the spirit of giving thanks is the humble recognition of what someone else has done.

I like what Paul has written here. How he writes in verse 3 that in his prayers he always thanks God for this congregation of people; and again in verse 9,
that he does not cease to pray for them. The language of this passage emphasizes the purpose of Paul’s prayers: that they may be filled with certain spiritual gifts, with knowledge and wisdom and understanding. He writes in such a way that inspires gratitude.

Grammar is significant here. The verbs are all passive—so that we know it’s not what the Colossians do, or have done, or have yet to do. It is what has been done for them. All through verses 9-14, God is the subject, described as the one who works and bestows grace upon the believers: “that you may be filled,” “that you might be strengthened with all power”; it is God who “has qualified us to share in the inheritance”; it is “God who has delivered us from darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son of God.” And it looks like there is one thing only we are called to do in the midst of all this loving activity of God, and that one thing is to give thanks, verse 12.

God has done everything, and our only task is to be grateful. That sounds way too easy; but it is the truth of the gospel, and it’s not really easy. For we have to fight against the temptation to make gratitude a work or a commandment, as we sometimes do, quantifying our responses to God and taking measurements of how grateful we are and judging whether others are grateful enough. But the truth
about gratitude is this: that it is our free and spontaneous and joyful response to God’s free gift to us.

Just think how we can’t even talk about giving thanks without using terms like gift and grace. If we understand the price of a gift— and not only money spent, but time and effort expended, price in regards to the friendship and love behind the gift— then we will respond with humble gratitude.

And this, thanksgiving, because “thanks” has to do with giving back. It always seemed an odd phrase to me, “to return thanks,” describing the prayer before eating. But the meaning is that we don’t just say the words of thanks, in our prayer before meals, for God’s care and provision, but that we give back ourselves in promise as we pray. To “return thanks” gives meaning to the prayer I heard almost every day growing up, when my dad would pray at meals, “bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies, and use our bodies in thy service.” It was his acknowledgment of God’s gift, and his grateful response as a promise to live as God’s servant.

This holiday season, there will be Christmas movies galore to watch on TV. But there’s never much in the way of Thanksgiving movies. A few: “A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving” is one, where the kids and Snoopy put together a feast; or
some old TV show may produce a reunion special set at Thanksgiving time. The high-point, the climax, of these little dramas will be the meal together, and returning thanks before they eat. Think what Thanksgiving would be if it were just people coming to visit, or even gathering to worship, or any kind of occasion without the food. In these films and in our experience, friends and family congregate to share food and share themselves, to celebrate and enjoy one another. In this way, Thanksgiving is closely related to our communion meal.

So, the reason for the season? That’s easy enough. It is the love of God that fills us, the Spirit of God that abides with us; it is Jesus the Messiah who has come to give us this impossible gift of forgiveness, and a new relationship with God, our Father, it is the call to come home to celebrate the thanksgiving feast with him. Thanksgiving is not just the beginning of the holiday season, but it is the very meaning of the season. Thankful living is knowing what has been given to us, and wanting to share that gift with others. It is the hope and joy of God’s love put in our hearts, that we then spread abroad in humble words and deeds.

We celebrate many holidays in America; I’m sure you have your favorites: 4\textsuperscript{th} of July, Labor Day, Veteran’s Day, Martin Luther King’s birthday; and Christmas
and Good Friday and Easter. Days we get off work and relax, and a time to stop and remember and celebrate. Of all our Red-Letter Days, Thanksgiving is the one that is both religious and secular, or civic. It is a day set aside to remember our nation’s past, to show gratitude for our freedoms, to be with family; but also it is a day of prayer, of giving thanks to God, and remembering God’s grace to us; and remembering that we must offer God’s love and kindness to others, also.

Thanksgiving is rejoicing and hope- for what God has done in the past and, we believe, what God will continue to do. It is a call to discipleship, as well: that what God has done for us, God calls us to do for others. These religious holidays we celebrate, when we rejoice at the birth of our Lord, or when we recall the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are important days to us as believers, but Thanksgiving is just as important, because it will show our response to God’s great blessings: that we must give thanks, and in doing so, give ourselves over to God. Let every day be a thanksgiving in which we commit ourselves to grateful service in the name of our Lord.