

### Colossians 1:3-12

You can just feel the love that St. Paul has for the Colossian people in these verses, can't you? And we can learn a lot about being thankful in how we interact with people from this reading, can't we? Paul starts off by saying, "We thank God for you!" and "We pray for you!" Today is a day for us to really show how thankful we are to God for the people in our lives. That might mean going right up to someone you hold near and dear and saying, "I thank God for you!" and then telling that person why you are so thankful to God for him or her. That might mean giving a big bear hug or a hearty handshake to someone who is very special to you. It might mean including the names of people you love in the prayer you say around the dinner table. However, you wish to do it, show people in some way how grateful you are for their presence in your life.

Paul showed his gratitude for people in his life in another way, too—by speaking to other people about Christians he found faithful, like his friend Epaphras. People are encouraged and sustained by the stories of others who have remained faithful to the Lord in their service to him. When was the last time you spoke well of someone to another person in your life? When we make a point of highlighting the good qualities in a person in our conversations with others, we are spurred on to be better people ourselves.

This leads to another important aspect of this passage from Paul. We sense in this letter that there is a certain connection going on among the people. They are relying on one another and helping each other. They are "bearing fruit" and "increasing in the knowledge of God," thanks to one another. How are we helping one another to bear fruit and increase in our knowledge of God? Well, you are doing it right now, by coming together to worship God in this place, to talk to one another about your faith journeys, and to read Scripture in each other's presence. As the song goes, "People need people." We need each other if we are ever going to make it through this experience we call life. So we need to be there for one another, whatever it takes. That's why God designed the Church. And as we know from another song, "The Church is a people. I am the Church. You are the Church. We are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world. Yes, we're the Church together."

So today I ask you, "Who are your people, your 'peeps,' if you will, the people who get you through your day, who help you see what God is doing in your life, the people who point you to Jesus every day?"

Take out your bulletin, if you would. There you will see three boxes with lines inside them. In the first box you see there, under the picture of two people hugging, I want you to write the names of special people in your life you are thankful to God for, and make a promise to pray for those people sometime today.

Has anyone ever said to you, “Go to your happy place”? Mental health professionals use this thought-starter to help their patients relax. So I ask you today as your spiritual health professional, “What is your happy place, the place you go to find rest for your body, mind and soul?” For many of you, that place may be here at church, where you are fed by Scripture, renewed by the words of forgiveness and absolution, nourished by the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and are free to praise our God through song. For others your “happy place” may be your home, which you consider to be a safe haven from the busyness of life and where you are surrounded by the love and care of your family. Still others may think of their workplace as their “happy place,” the place where they are in their elements, accomplishing tasks, being energized, and actively serving people.

How about you? What are your special places that you are thankful to God for? I want you again to take out your bulletin and write on the lines in the second box on the cover those places that are special to you. I will give you a moment to do that. (Allow time for them to make a list.)

Now that you have made your list of your special places, I want you to think with me about the reading from Genesis that was just read. In this reading, Jacob says of where he is “How awesome is this place!” And why does he say this? Because, he says, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” It was in this place in the dark of night where he stopped to sleep. Why was he in this place? Because he was fleeing away in fear from his brother Esau, whom he had wronged. But what happened in this place? Jacob had a dream of angels ascending and descending on a ladder to and from heaven and he heard the Lord assure him that “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Jacob awoke and built an altar in that place and called that place Bethel, which means House of God.

What we learn from this story is that the place itself may not have been that special to begin with. In fact, it originally had the rather unattractive name of Luz. But God made that place special by his presence and Jacob recognized that. The fact is that we need to recognize, too, that every place we find ourselves in is a Bethel, a House of God. God is with you as he was with Jacob, wherever you go. What can you do to bring that fact

to light in every place you are? You don't have to build an altar in your cubicle, but you can put a favorite Bible verse on a Post-it and put it on the side of your computer. You can put a picture of Jesus on the wall next to your kitchen table. You can wear a cross necklace to a party. Whatever it is, put little reminders of God's presence in your life in each and every place. And thank God every day for the places where he has put you to praise his name and live for him. The miracle is that because of God's presence with us and his blessing that surrounds us wherever we are, every place can be our "happy place" and our "place to be." Let's thank God especially this day for the blessing of his Son Jesus, called "Emmanuel," which means, "God with us," who came to this earth to move into our neighborhood and live with us and love us and save us through his death and resurrection. He is the foundation upon which we build our lives in every place we are. So we sing the hymn together now, Christ Is Our Cornerstone.

We have a lot of "stuff" in our lives, don't we? Our homes are filled with furniture and TVs and computers. Our closets are crammed with clothes. Our cupboards are stacked with plates and dishes. Our pantries are stocked with food. On this Thanksgiving Day, we take a step back to say thank you to God for our many "things."

But today I want you to thank God especially for your favorite things. You all know the song from *The Sound of Music* that goes, "Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, brown paper packages tied up with strings, these are a few of my favorite things." These are the things that Julie Andrews says help her "when the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad." When she simply remembers her favorite things, she says, "Then I don't feel so bad." Those are the kinds of things I want to think about right now.

Take out your bulletin again and write down on the lines in the third box below the coffee cup on the cover a few of your personal favorite things, the things that bring you comfort when you are feeling sad. I'll give you a minute to do that now. (Allow time for them to write down their favorite things.) If I may ask, "What did some of you write down?" (Allow people to respond.) What a wonderful collection of things! We could almost write our own version of "My Favorite Things."

What is it about these favorite things that give us such pleasure? Is it that they remind us of a happy time or calm us down or make us feel special or just plain make us feel

good? All of these things are good, of course, because they are symbols to us of the goodness of our God.

But our reading for today gives us a caveat about thinking too much about things as well. Jesus tells us point-blank not to worry so much about material things like clothing or food. Thinking too much about material things can take our focus away from God and the things that really matter, like forgiveness, salvation and heaven. The things of this earth are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us in heaven, Paul tells us. We need to keep our perspective clear and remember that the things of this earth will ultimately pass away, but the things of God will last forever.

So as we dine at our Thanksgiving meal surrounded by heaps of food and beautiful dishes and silverware, call to mind what these things all point to—that is, the banquet hall of heaven, where we will feast with all the saints in endless bliss. As we put on our finest clothes, may we be reminded that we will one day wear the robes of righteousness won for us by our Savior who died on the cross and rose to life again.

On this Thanksgiving Day, we do indeed thank God for the things of this earth, especially our favorite things, but we are called by God most of all to think of the things of his kingdom first and not let the things of this earth take center stage in our lives. When we put God's things first, everything else on this earth that we treasure will serve as a window into what God has in store for us. Let us thank God now for all the things he has given us by singing Now Thank We All Our God.