

The Love that Holds Us Together

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Colossians 3:1-17

“He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving and this second Sunday after the election, when we are variously weary of and hard-wired for political combat, the temptation is to speak a sentimental word, to offer a Hallmark Hall of Fame homily, to do what Presbyterians do so well by preaching a nice sermon. But sentiment will not do this year. For so many more reasons than an election, such a word is not helpful for those who face the holidays ahead with more dread than delight: because the chair emptied by divorce or death is emptier still in this time ahead; or the so-called problem child more problematic; or the abusive spouse more volatile; or the remembered wrongs more intensified; or the drinking more unbearable; or the rejection more pronounced; or the betrayals more unforgivable; or the secrets more lethal; or the anger fueled by our political divisions more palpable.

This is a word for those who face the prospect of Thanksgiving with a prayer for endurance on their lips and a prayer of gratitude offered up only when it is all over. This is a word for those who face the holidays with the simple hope that it will not be as bad this year as it was last year. This is a word to all who will find themselves in the season ahead not only hurt most by the ones who are supposed to love them best, but also a word to those hurting most the ones they were given to love-- which is to say, this is a word addressed to all who exist in the midst of a family.

To listen for that word, we turn to Paul's Letter to Christians in Colossae where I kept reading until I came upon on the first word of the third chapter, a word written to people living in households characterized more by tension than tenderness. "Set your mind," Paul says, "on things which are above, not on things that are on earth." Lest we think the advice given is a kind of denial, be assured that he goes on to talk about people working out relationships with their feet very much on the ground and their feelings very much at issue. But he first advises us not to get lost in the moment, not to get done in by any present fear or false hope, not to let current conditions dictate the future to us. In particular, he is reminding those mired in a seemingly hopeless situation to take a cosmic step upward, to view the events of the moment from the perspective of eternity, of Christ's reign.

But more, for he says to those at risk in the midst of real relationships, to those most fearful in these times, "Your life is hidden with Christ," which is literally to say: who you *really* are is safe with Christ and ultimately safe from any in this world who would do you harm. Whether it is a spouse who takes the occasion, at the passing of the cranberry sauce, to say you are worthless; or a parent whose back of the hand before saying grace has left you stunned into silence; or a child whose disregard for your personhood has made you deeply regret your parenthood; or a sibling, a cousin whose hidden hate has bubbled up to the surface, the letter speaks a word of assurance: who you really are is hid with Christ, you are safe; and a word of counsel: live in this present moment always with the perspective of God's gracious reign in your head and heart.

That said, the apostle gets specific about how, in the moment, we are to be with each other, we who have been given into the same household by God's strange and terrible providence. In a word he says, disarm yourselves. Drop your defenses. Literally the word means strip yourselves.

Before I say one word more, I need to be very clear. Always with a sermon, the ones who least need to hear take it to heart and the ones addressed slip out the side door. The apostle first is speaking to those who are in power in a household (which, of course, could be husband or wife, parent or child, grandparent or maiden aunt--be assured, we each think the other is in power, so perhaps we all should listen up!) To the one or ones who find ways to lord it over another, to the ones in need of being one up to be anybody at all, Paul speaks. And from the perspective of Christ's reign, he begins to erase the lines drawn, the distinctions made, the battles won, as he names the weapons we use to undo each other around a thanksgiving table or when all are trapped in the SUV on the way to grandmother's house.

Take off, says the apostle, your anger and your wrath. He uses two Greek words, *thumos* meaning the flash of sudden anger which ends as quickly as it begins; and then another word which means an inveterate sort of anger: a long-lasting, slow-burning anger which refuses to be pacified and nurses its ire to keep wrath warm. It is the anger that is always seeking someone to blame, which holds on to wrong, which cannot forgive. Take off your anger and your wrath.

Take off malice. How true it is that, when you live with someone long enough, you know just the thing that

will get them, just the word that will wound them. Malice is that desire to hurt and harm, and the ones who are closest to us can do it best. So too put away slander, which brings in a third party: the need not just to wound another but to do so in front of one who matters. And if slander seems too strong a word, consider the belittling, the put-down, the cutting word--usually spoken to the least of these--and timed to be said in another's presence. What belittlers never understand is that they are the most diminished in the eyes of others by their behavior. Finally there is the weapon of abusive language: that sort of interchange when words act like a slap across the face or a fist to the stomach. "Get rid of all such things," we are told, "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth."

This letter is telling us, of course, to do the very thing families seem unable to do. Patterns of behavior over many years become so second nature that we would not feel ourselves without them: naked without the put-down, vulnerable without the arrogance, at risk apart from our meanness, powerless without the oppressive silence. In a sense, the self we have become would have to die--and that, says Paul in his preface, has already happened. That is what God in Christ has already accomplished. Hence, from the perspective of Christ's reign, these verses are not so much telling us what to do, but announcing to us that in Christ the old self has already died; saying that who we really are--along with these weary ones who have been trying unsuccessfully to love us--is hidden and held with Christ in God. There is no need, he says, to be on the offense: the battle we keep fighting *for* ourselves or *against* these others has been won by Christ, in whose love all things hold together.

Therefore only to those in the household disarmed by Christ--to those who have laid down the weapons of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abuse--does the apostle say, "Do not lie to one another," the lie so often being the defense of the least of these, the lie being the personae presented to prevent the onslaught, the lie being all that is left in a household held together by power instead of love. Now, he says, encounter one another in all vulnerability, knowing that no one around the table is better than another, no one around the table is more important than another, for all have been remade by grace alone, in the image of God.

What in the world might that look like, feel like, be like around our tables set for thanksgiving? If we take this letter at its word about the gifts of the Spirit, we might find ourselves surrounded by a bunch of people sitting at table being kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving, loving, peaceable, grateful. What are the chances? If you want to know the truth, I think it might be a very boring meal. Which is to say that somewhere between this ideal of the family in our text--an ideal that leads us to conclude the family we have been given is hopelessly dysfunctional--and the dark reality of abuse in which more struggle than anyone knows in this congregation--between the ideal and the reality, most of us have been given, in the providence of God, a human family: flawed, sometimes remarkable, many times remiss in the things which make for love, not worthy of our worship, but perhaps worth our inexplicable return in this season.

"Hadn't Ezra noticed [Cody wondered, in Ann Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*] that the family as a whole had never yet finished one of his dinners? That they'd fight and stomp off halfway through, or sometimes not even manage to get seated in the first place? Well, of course he must have *noticed*, but was it clear to him as a pattern, a theme?...It was true that once...they had made it all the way to dessert; so if they hadn't ordered dessert you could say they'd completed the meal. But the fact was, they did order dessert, which was left to sag on the plates when their mother accused Cody of deliberately setting up shop as far from home as possible. There was a stiff-backed little quarrel. Conversation fell apart. Cody walked out. So technically, even that meal could not be considered finished. Why did Ezra go on trying? Why did the rest of them go on showing up, was more to the point.

"In fact, they probably saw more of each other than happy families did. It was almost as if what they couldn't get right, they had to keep returning to." As if what they couldn't get right, they had to keep returning to. Isn't that this family keeps doing Sunday after Sunday?

Somewhere between the ideal and the reality, we have been given, in the providence of God, a human family—not only the family that will gather at table on Thursday but the family that gathers at Christ's table: flawed, sometimes remarkable, many times remiss in the things which make for love, not worthy of our worship but maybe, one more time, worth our inexplicable return. None of us will ever get it right, this thing called family, this thing called church. Many of us may never finish a dinner short of the Christ coming again. A fact that leads me to believe we have been given to each other, in the meantime, by the God who is in the world picking up the pieces, by the God whose grace and love alone has the power to help us make it to the pumpkin pie!