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 “Enemies of Gratitude: Small Thinking”Rev. Jennie SankeyNovember 22, 2020Ephesians 1:15-23 |
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**15**I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason **16I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers**. **17**I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know Christ, **18**so that, **with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,** what *are* the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, **19**and what *is* the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. **20**God put this power to work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, **21**far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. **22**And God has put all things under Christ’s feet and has made Christ the head over all things for the church, **23**which is Christ’s body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

(Ephesians 1:15-23, NRSV with some pronoun changes for clarity)

We are less than 5 weeks away from Christmas and 6 weeks from 2021, and I have been observing MUCH rejoicing. Yards have been lit with Christmas décor since Halloween, and people are counting down the days until the ball drops on 2020. Something I keep hearing though is, “I can’t WAIT until 2020 is over.” I’ve said it too-2021 seems like a light at the end of a tunnel, even though I know nothing magical will happen at midnight on January 1. It is tempting and even necessary for some, to just go into survival mode until the end of the year and just try and make it. We’re too busy, too worried, too disappointed, too overwhelmed to do anything beyond our daily tasks: feed ourselves and anyone we might be responsible for, avoid getting COVID, get through the fall 2020 semester of school in a pandemic. Just get through.

This kind of thinking is our last “enemy of gratitude” in our November sermon series. Thinking small, narrowing our vision, tamping down our hopes will do nothing good for us in 2020 or 2021 or ever. As you gather around your Thanksgiving table this year, even if it’s a table with just you - don’t let small thinking steal your gratitude and joy-for there is still much to give thanks for and much to hope for. Jesus doesn’t take a break in crisis. He doesn’t scale back his ministry and wait it out. Even in death, Christ’s ministry cannot be stalled. In fact, Jesus seems to get even busier when the needs of the world come to his attention. Now more than ever, we pray as our scripture instructed today, for one another and the church that “with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which Christ has called us (1:18).”

With all these big holidays on the horizon, I’m guessing you didn’t do much to prepare for today’s big celebration-it’s Christ the King Sunday! (Confetti)! This is why we’re wearing white instead of ordinary time green today. We are celebrating the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar. In the church, we walk through the life of Christ each year, beginning with the season of Advent, as we prepare for Christ’s birth, which always begins four Sundays before Christmas. This year, that’s November 29. And if there’s a beginning, there’s got to be an end-which is today.

With this lesser known church holiday, we look back on the year, and on the life of Christ, as we once again awaited his arrival at Christmas, heard stories of his life and ministry, journeyed through Lent, mourned his death, and celebrated his resurrection on Easter. We welcomed the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and then spent our summer and fall growing in discipleship. We look back and see how Christ has reigned through all of this, that in every moment of our lives this year, Christ has been Lord. In the scheme of things, Christ the King Sunday is not a day in the life of the church that will ever rival Christmas or Easter. But it is a helpful lens with which, perhaps, the eyes of our hearts can be enlightened. We can look into the present moment, now, and see that Christ is Lord. And we look forward to the hope to which Christ has called us, and find that Christ is Lord.

Artist, author and Methodist minister Jan Richardson paints and writes in reflection on scripture, and wrote this about the hope our Ephesians reading speaks to:

“Hope is not always comforting or comfortable. Hope asks us to open ourselves to what we do not know, to pray for illumination in this life, to imagine what is beyond our imagining, to bear what seems unbearable. It calls us to keep breathing when beloved lives have left us, to turn toward one another when we might prefer to turn away. Hope draws our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future but propels us also into the present, where Christ waits for us to work with him toward a more whole world now.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This kind of hope is something that God’s children have been working on since day one. The letter to the Ephesians “celebrates the author’s vision of the church.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Jews and Gentiles brought together in a new, unified community. But this hadn’t exactly happened yet at the time of this letter’s circulation, which is why the letter was written in the first place. Tensions were high between Jews and Gentiles in the first century, and scholars speculate that this letter was intended either to encourage Gentiles to recognize their identity as children of God and full partners of the church or to better respect their Jewish fellow believers. The letter goes on beyond what we read today into an appeal for the early church to maintain unity and progress in living out the Christian values of truth, love, and forgiveness. Yet even in this letter, scripture itself, we find small thinking. The author uses the analogy of Christ’s relationship to the church to justify the structure of patriarchal family life (see chapter 5:22, beginning with one of my least favorite verses of scripture, “wives be subject to your husbands…). Their hope was enough to draw them toward a “more whole world,” but their hearts weren’t enlightened yet to see how complete Christ’s reign was over even the power of cultural norms.

When we remember Jesus is Lord over all the big structures and little moments of our lives, over every “rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come (1:21),” we can recognize the hope that Christ has called us to, hope that goes beyond what happens this or this season of life. Hope that we may not yet be able to imagine.

I have great hope for Pfizer’s vaccine to be a balm that brings about a gradual return to normalcy. But Christ does not call us to put all our hope in Pfizer. I have great hope in the future of female leadership knowing that little girls will see a woman as Vice President. But Christ has not called us to put all our hope in who is president or vice president. I have great hope that 2021 will bring us back together in person. But Christ has not called us to let the calendar year rule our life. We give thanks that COVID-19 does not have authority over us. We give thanks that a president, Republican or Democrat is not our ruler. We give thanks that the 2020 calendar year does not have dominion over our lives. Jesus does. Christ is Lord. And the hope to which Christ calls us is no small thing. If hope is imagining what is beyond imagining, breathing beyond loss, turning towards people we consider incompatible with our lives, then the 6 remaining weeks of 2020 isn’t enough time for us to complete the work. It is enough time though, for us to have hope. Christ doesn’t scale back ministry in crisis. Christ doesn’t wait it out to “see what happens.” Christ shows up in the flesh, his presence filling all things and times and places. Christ empowers us to be his body for one another; his healing hands, his compassionate eyes, his listening ears, his prophetic voice, his embracing arms, his dusty feet, taking him from place to place.

As your church leaders worked on the budget for 2021 this year, Pastor Katie asked each committee to participate in a discernment process before they sat down to look at the numbers. Each committee thought back on what it looked like in 2020 when they were doing their best work. Informed by these stories, they developed a purpose statement for their committee. Then, working within the framework of their purpose statement, they were asked to consider the question, “If money were no object…What is God calling this committee to lead PHPC to in 2021?”

I sat in on the Christian Education Committee and the Preschool Board’s processes, and we came up with some big dreams. But it took us a minute to get there. It was so easy, knowing that we were doing this process in the context of making our 2021 budget, to think small and get stuck in the details. Especially in 2020.

“The playground could really use a makeover.”

“Playground equipment is really expensive. Do you think we could get a grant?”

“There are some safety issues, drainage issues, and just plain old age issues. At the minimum it needs new mulch.”

“Where did we get mulch last time? Think we can get it free this year?”

 “Anyone know anyone with mulch?”

By itself, mulch isn’t a very impressive “if money wasn’t an issue” answer. So we wrote down “new mulch” and moved on. Some other “big dreams” we came up with included having the training and accommodations to better include children with special needs in our ministries. We talked about having a crying/breastfeeding room for parents to go to during worship where they could still see and hear the service. We talked about having a lecture series with paid theologians. We talked about how a revamped playground could serve our preschool and our children and our community. Our list grew and grew, and as it grew we found a theme that was worth putting our hope into: to better support and equip families to follow Jesus and engage in the life of the church. Through just a sprinkle of God’s spirit of wisdom and revelation as we sought the will of Christ, our eyes were enlightened a shade brighter to the hope we believe Christ is calling us to.

I’m also not putting all my hope in the church budget either, but I am putting all my hope in us, God’s people. God’s great power that is at work in Christ, is also at work in us, Christ’s body. I echo the author of Ephesians who opened our text today saying, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers (1:15).” Even if you feel like you’re not even “making it through” right now, just by joining us in worship today, from wherever you might be, you are enacting some small sliver of hope that it is Christ who is King, and that is not small thinking at all. So I pray that the “God of our Lord Jesus Christ, may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know Christ (1:16),” each day as we strive to join our Lord and Savior to work toward a more whole world now.

This Thanksgiving, when you go around the table and name what you’re grateful for (or even if you’re just naming it to yourself), try your hardest to resist saying “I’m grateful that 2020 is almost over.” Because it is not the calendar or the pandemic or any earthly power or person or system that rules our lives. It is Christ. So remember what has happened in faith and love this year and give thanks. In all of it, Christ was Lord. Christ is Lord. And Christ is calling us to hope.

1. https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/11/19/so-that-you-may-know-the-hope/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 320.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)