

Being Thankful for the Light

Colossians 1:11-20
Richard C. Allen
November 21, 2010

South Glastonbury
Connecticut

I lit a candle the other night, a single candle on a very dark night. The light of the candle did not eliminate the darkness, but it took the fear of the darkness away. The light of the candle was lovely, warm, and reassuring.

When Paul wrote his pastoral letter to the Colossians, he reminded them how Christ is a candle in their darkness. He invited them to be thankful for this Light. In addition to being thankful for food and family and friends, he urges them to express their gratitude for the Christ Light among them.

As we read through his Letter to this church in the town of Colossae, we see that the darkness there had to do with an unwillingness to forgive each other. People held tightly to old grudges and wouldn't let go of past wrongs. In hanging on to these ancient resentments, the Colossians were robbing themselves of the very freedom Christ came to establish. Like a backpacker with a pack that's too heavy, they walked bent over, weighed down by this spiritual oppression.

No one had ever invited this community to taste the sweetness that comes when those words 'I forgive you' are spoken from the heart. Sometimes, all it takes is someone to make the invitation. This is one way to understand the power of the cross; it is the power to loosen our tongues and to soften our hearts that we might look a brother or a sister in the eye and say without ambiguity, 'You caused me great pain, you treated me with disrespect, you did what you did, and I choose to forgive you.'

When those words are spoken, TWO people are set free: the offender and the one offended. Freedom rings when those words are pronounced! When those words are spoken, a window shade is opened and the Light of Christ is allowed to shine in. A healing takes place. A reconciliation begins.

Usually, when I ask people in a small group to name a religious experience they've had, there is silence in the room. No one has heard the voice of God; no one has seen God face to face; no one has walked on water. But when I ask those same people to tell a story about a time someone forgave them from the heart or a time when they spoke the forgiving words themselves, they relate events that move me to tears. It is in the mystery of giving and receiving forgiveness that we encounter the Light of Christ, the very real presence of a Living God. If you don't believe me, just give it a try.

I have a mental picture of the Colossian Christians testing this out on one other, one at a time, with great trepidation. Can you hear them?

Felix, back a spell, you spread some untrue rumors about me in the locker room. I want you to know how much they hurt. I want you to know I forgive you. I won't hold it against you another day.

Sally, back a spell, you hurt my feelings when you criticized my apple crisp recipe, the one I got from my grandmother. I want you to know I forgive you. I won't hold it against you another day.

The Colossian church became known as a community where the Christ Light shone brightly.

Four days from today, we'll all be gathered around a table somewhere for Thanksgiving dinner. It might be a lavish table with a meal with all the trimmings.

It might be a table at a McDonald's restaurant. It might be a table at the House of Bread. It might be a fold down table on the back of the seat in front of you on a flight to Miami. It might be a table dug out of soil in a fox hole somewhere in Afghanistan. On that day we'll bow our heads to say a prayer of thanks. The witness of Scripture is to include a word of gratitude for the Light of Christ that breaks in whenever people look each other in the eye and speak those astounding words of forgiveness as if they meant them.

The church at Colossae became known as a congregation of forgiving fools. That's how I would want this church to be known, as a bunch of faithful people who let themselves get carried away with expressions of forgiveness that arise from one person's heart and find their rest in the heart of the other. In the greatest of hope, Amen!