

“Giving Thanks”

Colossians 1:1-8

May 31, 2020

If hypothetically the world were to end and everything was lost, all our knowledge gone, how would you tell the next set of people the most important information you know in the fewest possible words?

What would be your sentence?

My wife, Jessie, and I were on our way back from the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore last Saturday when we first heard this question as presented by the podcast “Radiolab.” Throughout this episode, which is called “the cataclysm sentence,” the podcast hosts interview several people in different fields such as artists, writers, philosophers, historians, chefs, and musicians in an attempt to find out what would be that one sentence that they would like future generations to know and use as a cornerstone for their new society. Their answers addressed important topics like death, fear, natural balance, race, atomic particles, how to make musical instruments like the classic piano or the middle-eastern oud. And of course, there was an answer regarding God and how our imagination can be very helpful when describing who God is.

Nevertheless, there was one specific answer that truly caught me by surprise. American animator, director, and screenwriter Rebecca Sugar simply replied, “that humans have really loved being here - you know, leave behind your nest and evidence of how you were in it with the people that you loved.” Wow. An honest and powerful reminder that we need to hear today.

When I first tried to answer this “cataclysm question,” I thought about several theological phrases or philosophical approaches that had provided me some guidance in my life. Then, I thought about

something more practical that all people could actually understand, like how to light a fire. And finally, I became frustrated and could not come up with anything worth sharing, so I tried to stop thinking about it. But here is the thing, I could not stop thinking about that question. This cataclysm question kept resurfacing with powerful waves. It kept driving my thoughts during the day while also bringing up mixed emotions in unexpected times.

This is a heavy question - especially during these uncertain times. It requires deep reflection about our lives and what we value the most. It makes us think of the many things we have learned and then choose what we believe to be the most important. It points our attention to the future while also surveying what we are doing today to make that future actually happen. And that is no easy task. But I think makes this cataclysm question even more difficult are two serious things: perhaps some of us cannot find an answer because of our fear of not finding anything worth sharing and for many of us right now, this question may not be so hypothetical but a reality we cannot avoid - a dilemma we are currently facing.

How would you tell the next set of people the most important information you know in the fewest possible words? What would be your sentence?

After hearing Rebecca Sugar’s response, my priorities shifted as I was trying to find answers myself. Instead of trying to write a really long run-on sentence explaining a topic, or a thing, or an activity I sincerely value, I should be explaining how much I have loved living here on this earth; how much I have loved the communities I have been a part of; how much I have loved the church that has raised me and mold me; how much I have loved my family and friends even if I don’t

get see them often; how much I have loved my wife and my dog especially during this pandemic; and how much I have loved God because God has loved me first.

I think this cataclysm question, while being extremely complicated by nature, provides us with the opportunity to really reflect on our priorities and what matters the most in our lives. It shakes the foundations of that which we believe to be essential, reminding us that life is a precious gift, that love transcends beyond time and space, and that even when the world falls apart God remains here with us, guiding us, moving us forward. Therefore, I think my personal response to this cataclysm question would be, “leave a trace of how you have loved that which you hold to be precious and important in your life.” Leave a trace of how you have loved God’s creation, all of God’s people, and God himself.

In our New Testament reading this morning, we hear of a church that was certainly leaving a trace of their love for God and for all God’s people. The apostle Paul writes to the church in Colossae primarily to address some theological concerns regarding the authority and divinity of Jesus Christ. But he also writes to them recognizing and endorsing the good things that he has heard about them, about their faithfulness and their love. The issue within the church in Colossae was found in some members following false teachings and therefore misleading others, thereby causing divisions among themselves. As a consequence, it is in this letter that the apostle Paul develops his most profound Christological theology as he defends and establishes that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the son of God.

Despite these severe difficulties within the church in Colossae, the apostle Paul acknowledges the fact that this imperfect community continued to be the church. They continued the good work of welcoming and serving all God’s people. Even with all their differences and inevitable clashes, the people from this community of faith were trying their best to remain faithful to the truth known in Jesus Christ, hopeful in the promises of God, and loving towards every

single person by acknowledging that within each and every one of us the Holy Spirit dwells. This church was moving forward into an uncertain future walking by faith together leaving a trace of God’s love. And so their good work was noticed by many and echoed by many more.

I believe this church in Colossae serves us as an example of how we, the church of today, can continue the good work of the gospel despite the turbulent times we may be experiencing. This church is a reminder that we can work together and be faithful to what God has entrusted us even when we envision different futures. We just have to listen and let the Holy Spirit guide us. We just have to see the face of God in every person we encounter. And walk by faith.

With that in mind, how would you tell the next set of people the most important information you know in the fewest possible words? What would be your sentence? I think the church in Colossae would answer this question with another question: “What would you like others to hear about you?” This is another important question we must consider as we continue to move forward.

Dear Second Presbyterian Church, I had heard stories about you before coming here as a Lake Fellow. Of course, good and faithful stories! I had heard about your faithful work within the city of Indianapolis through your various ministries such as the Northside food pantry, Christmas Benevolence, Family Promise, the Greenbriar school partnership, the summer and fall sales, the splendid community concerts, and many, many more... But I had also heard about your commitment to welcoming and loving all of God’s people, your efforts in creating a more inclusive community, your compassionate care for members and non-members, your vision of loving those who are strangers like your friends. Yes, I had heard about your faith and your love. And so, I couldn’t say no when you offered me the great opportunity to come and serve God with you, to learn from your wisdom and your passions, and to walk, at least for a little while, this journey of faith alongside you.

And so for the last two years you have welcomed me and my family. You have treated us with such kindness and deep hospitality. You have invited us into your homes to share meals and set a place for us at your table. You have celebrated and nourished my gifts in ministry. Your faith and your love do indeed spring from the relentless hope in which you believe as God's people. We have hoped together. We have rejoiced together. We have cried together. We have prayed together. And I have truly loved every part of it. I hope you see the trace I leave behind of all the love and gratitude I have for you all, for this church, and for this city. But we have reached the end of our time together. We have to go our separate ways. But you must go on into the promised land.

Similarly to what Moses experienced when he climbed up to Mount Nebo, this morning I stand from this pulpit and I see the vastness of God's promises. I see God's faithfulness and God's love for us right here and even beyond this space. I see a land filled with possibilities as we continue to plant for our next fruitful harvest. I see a sanctuary, not empty, but sent out into the world spreading glimpses of goodness, healing that which is broken, and caring for those who are destitute. And most importantly, I see a community of faith that is committed to truly loving each other because they love God above all things.

I will not be here when you come back into this sanctuary and fill the pews. I will not witness when you finally enjoy the blessings that come when the church gathers physically. I will not be here to harvest the good fruits that we planted together. And that is okay because in a couple of months you will welcome two new Lake Fellows who will continue the good work that has already started. Like Joshua, these new Lake Fellows will offer their gifts and support as you go on into the future that God has already planned for you.

And most importantly, the Holy Spirit will also remain with you. On this Pentecost Sunday we are reminded that we are never alone. God continues to be with us even if we are apart. God continues to find us in every time and in every place calling us to be the church

- serving and loving one another. So we must go on, we must keep waiting until the time we shall gather again. We must keep trusting that the goodness we create today will be shared tomorrow; that the love we show today will be also shown tomorrow; that the faithfulness we express today, will be also proclaimed tomorrow.

And so the only thing I can say to you, beloved Second Presbyterian Church is: in my prayers I always give thanks to God for you for I have heard and witnessed your faith in Jesus Christ and of the love that you have for all God's people because of the hope in which you believe...

Alleluia! Amen.