

Sermon November 18, 2018

We Gather Together

Mark 13:1-13

The Reverend Roger Pancost

In each of our lives there are moments that change us forever. Rebecca Voelkel shares one of these moments in a recent UCC Still Speaking Devotional. She writes, "It was Christmas morning 1987, and I was in the remote, mountainous Salvadoran village of Santa Marta as part of a small delegation of North American Christians and Jews. We awakened, disoriented, to the ground shaking. Quickly, an older leader in the community explained that the Salvadoran government was dropping bombs nearby to scare and intimidate them. The contrast between the ground-shaking bombs and the early Christmas morning was lost on no one. With this backdrop, we heard more about the village's history, including the killing of the elder's daughter and the murder of his childhood friend. He described in detail the ways in which colonization targets real bodies with torture, pain, and death.

But the story made a sharp turn when, after describing the history, we sat in silence and prayed. Then he said, "Do you know how I can tell which North Americans are going to last here with us?" After a pause in which no one answered, he continued, "I know that someone is going to last here when they know how to laugh, to sing, to dance, to experience joy . . . because the work we are doing is so difficult, we have to claim the promise of how the world is going to be, now. We have to live the promise. That's what our faith teaches us."

(Stillspeaking Daily Devotional, November 13, 2018, "Laughing, Singing and Dancing our Way to Resilience," Rebecca Voelkel)

The lesson that Rebecca learned from the leader in a remote El Salvadoran village reflects the lesson that Jesus shares with his disciples in this morning's lesson from Mark. You will recall that when an un-named disciples says to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Jesus responds by saying, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus then goes on to say that there will be many future troubles. There will be wars and natural disasters. Many people will try to lead the disciples astray. Others will put them on trial. Jesus tells the disciples to not lose faith in the midst of all the turmoil they will experience. Those

who will last are the ones who come together and do good works, holding fast to the promise of God's abiding presence.

The turmoil that Jesus speaks of could be a description of many times in history, including our own. The daily news is filled with reports of wars and acts of violence. There are numerous natural disasters throughout the world. Famine and sickness take the lives of countless individuals.

Our lesson from Jesus, and the elder in El Salvador, is that we are to gather together and hold fast to our faith in God's abiding love. When we gather together we encourage each other and inspire one another to continue doing good in the world. We help one another remember that in the midst of great difficulties, there is still much to be thankful for. In the face of that which is frightening, love is the response.

This same message is related to the holiday known as Thanksgiving. I am not referring to the romanticized image of Pilgrims and Native Americans coming together for a feast. I am referring to the process by which Thanksgiving became a National Holiday.

For many years, people in New England celebrated Thanksgiving on any day that they felt was appropriate. However, an individual named Sarah Hale, believed that it would be good for the entire nation to set aside a common day for Thanksgiving. Over several years Sarah Hale petitioned a number of U.S. presidents, but to no avail. Her request was always ignored.

Then, during the harsh realities of the American Civil War, she wrote to Abraham Lincoln. She implored the President to establish a National holiday where everyone in the country would stop on the same day and give thanks. Needless to say, it was a difficult time for people to feel thankful. The country was at war, food was scarce, and money was tight. People wondered how you could give thanks in the midst of so many problems. After considering this request, President Lincoln, and others, came to the conclusion that gathering together to give thanks during the tough times was just what people needed to do. President Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving Proclamation in August, 1863.

Sarah Hale was no stranger to life's difficulties. Having been born in 1788, she was not allowed to attend college because she was a woman. At age 35, her husband, David, died of pneumonia. Faced with the task of providing for her five children, Sarah took in sewing work.

Through the support of her husband's colleague's, Sarah had a book of her poems published. One of her most famous poems is "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Sarah Hale went on to write the novel, Northwood, which dealt with the issue of slavery.

Sarah Hale eventually became the editor of a prominent women's magazine. Through that position she championed the development of colleges for women and urged that women be given the chance to teach in them. She also supported Elizabeth Blackwell in her pursuit of becoming a physician and argued that single women should be allowed to serve as missionaries. Sarah Hale retired from her work at age 90. She is a beautiful example of an individual who did not allow the difficulties of life prevent her from doing good in the world.

We do not face the same threats as the people in the village in El Salvador, and yet we sometimes feel threatened by the words and actions of others.

We are not persecuted because of our faith like the early disciples of Jesus, and yet our beliefs are sometimes ridiculed.

We are not living during a civil war, and yet there is great tension in our nation regarding a variety of topics.

We may not have experienced the same personal difficulties as Sarah Hale, and yet all of us have had our share of such difficulties.

How good it is that we are gathered together today. Together we are able to give God thanks.

Together we find encouragement and support.

Together we are inspired to not let the troubles of the world prevent us from sharing God's love with others.

