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Bangor, Maine
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TOGETHER IN CHRIST
1 COLOSSIANS 1:11-20

In addition to being Thanksgiving Sunday, today has formerly been called Christ the King Sunday; now it is known as the "Reign of Christ" Sunday. November 24th is marked on the liturgical calendar as the last Sunday of the church year. It is a time when we celebrate the rule of Christ, an occasion when we pay homage to Christ as the lord of our lives.

Our scripture lesson this morning from Colossians is a letter to an ancient people-- fearful and confused. In his foreword to Colossians in The Message, Eugene Peterson says the author of the letter is making his case "from a position of rooted humility...with the energies of most considerate love...with a heart that is warmly and wonderfully kind." And so in this letter to the church at Colossae, the author is trying to reassure these frightened gentiles by saying that God's original purpose is to gather up all sin and suffering and brokenness in Christ: *So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe--people and things, animals and atoms--get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies... (The Message).*

You and I live in a day and time when there are people everywhere who do not feel that sense of a God who is "spacious and roomy." All they seem to feel is a great emptiness. In one of his books, James Kavanaugh writes about a conversation he had with a lonely young man one night in a bar: *He's a salesman, thirtyish, handsome, and alone. He asks about my work and tells me that he sells plywood. He's recently divorced, has two children living with his wife, and believes any reconciliation is impossible. He has dated a dozen different girls in the past two months, but is getting tired of the chase and wants to settle down. He glances at an attractive blond who is sitting near us. He sighs, rubs his hand over his right eye, looks at me and says, "What does it all mean?" I answer him that I'm not always sure. Guiltily he talks of church and childhood, saying the same thing I've heard thousands of times in my life. "I'm not very religious; the church routine doesn't do much for me," and the like. Then he sips his drink and asks, "Do you believe in God?" And I answer him, "Yes, in my own way." And then listen to these words--"I wish I could," he says, "I've been looking for something all of my life!" (Norman Neaves).*

The experts in church growth and Evangelism say that in this decade the aimlessness, the wandering of the man in the bar is common among God's people. Unlike past generations, many folks living today, say these experts, don't

understand why they should join a local congregation. Why would I want to do that? They ask.

I am currently speaking with a group of people who have been faithfully visiting Hammond Street Church who are not like that. They feel that being a part of a church allows them to be in community, to form very special alliances within a remarkable collection of God's people who are above all, real and authentic. Hammond Streeters are folks, as someone told me last week, "Who walk the talk." In my view, joining a church provides a way to connect with a spacious, still speaking God who makes it all happen.

The writer of the letter to the Colossians is wanting to tell the Christians there that they can believe in something. For him, believing in Jesus "is not simply a matter of fitting Jesus into our present way of thinking. We are transferred, moved, deported from one kingdom to another. Nothing is as we have known it" (Neta Pringle, Feasting On The Word).

Next Sunday, on the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of the new church year, we are going to become very mindful of the fact that Jesus entered the world as a tiny baby. That was a transformative light for the dark days of ancient Israel. That corner of the world we know as Bethlehem suddenly became the change agent for the universe. And what changed everything forever was the birth of a babe in a manger.

Nearly ten years ago the world held its collective breath as a three-year-old toddler, Vanessa Mamani, fell down a 70-foot well in Argentina. As in the case of the trapped miners in Chile, people from every walk of life--including the president of the country--gathered on the surface. As the news of her fate reached around the world, people everywhere prayed that she might be freed from her earthly prison. The only way for this little child to get out of the well was to put on the rescue harness that had been sent down to her. Seven-and-a-half hours after 200 police and firefighters worked to free her, Vanessa Mamani managed to place the harness around her tiny chest. When she emerged unscathed on top of the ground, there were thunderous cheers. All the world had stopped once again for a little child.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, I am thinking about the little child born twenty-one centuries ago. His birth transformed a world then and now. It is that continuing event that called the people called Colossians and calls generations of Hammond Streeters to become a part of a faith community, by uniting in common cause with fellow Christians and with one another. When we think about the reign of Christ, there is that very real sense that when it comes to the church, there is this radical, all-or-nothing quality.

I remember reading once a quote by the late Maya Angelou who was always shocked when she heard people say very casually, "I'm a Christian." Those words always took her by storm, she said, because for her that was a lifelong proposition. As Maya Angelou saw it, we are always in the business of becoming Christians. It is a continual process.

If the image of Christ as King seems outdated or unworkable for you, then think of Jesus as having the first claim on your life. That is what you and I

acknowledge as followers of Christ; that is to say. We don't care who knows it. We're proud of that primary allegiance, because it informs who and what we are.

Fred Craddock tells about a missionary back in the 1940's named Oswald Golter who was sent the money by his mission board to come home from north China after ten years of service there. When he docked in a Port in India to await passage home, he found a boatload of refugees housed in a warehouse on the pier. The refugees weren't wanted in many ports and they were stranded there. It was Christmas time, so the missionary went to the warehouse to visit with these refugees. He said to them: "Merry Christmas! What do you want for Christmas?" "We're not Christians," they said. "We don't believe in Christmas." "I know," said the missionary, "But what do you want for Christmas?" They finally mentioned some wonderful German pastries they were fond of. Oswald Golter, the missionary, scoured the city and found a bakery that made these German pastries. He cashed in his ticket home and bought baskets and baskets of the pastries and took them to the refugees...and wished them a Merry Christmas. When he later told the story, a student said, "But sir, why did you do that for them? They weren't Christians. They don't even believe in Jesus." "I know," he replied, "But I do!" (Dr. James Moore).

Today on this Thanksgiving Sunday, you and I are also thinking about how we will celebrate on Thursday. There will be the feast, of course, here at the church. A good number of you have bought and brought the ingredients to make our HSCC Thanksgiving a Bountiful Harvest, as we throw open our doors to anyone in the community who would like to share a meal. Others in our church family will prepare a dinner from the 1300 Thanksgiving baskets being prepared at food and medicine, including some pumpkin breads baked by Hammond Streeters. On Thanksgiving Day, others of you will be marking the day by celebrating with friends and family. My grandson, Cole, and I will be in New York City. We'll begin the day by watching the Macy's Parade march down Fifth Avenue, and then we'll find a nearby restaurant to have our Thanksgiving meal. The only thing that makes me a little sad about our feast is that there won't be any leftovers! A small price to pay! The point is that across our country and around the world there will be many unique ways to celebrate Thanksgiving. Years ago, at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, my sister and I participated in the Thanksgiving Service that is held each year for all the Americans who cannot be in the United States on this special day. It gave me a shiver to see our countrymen and women lined up outside the cathedral hours before the service began.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, you and I are reminded that a monarch asks us to give him the first part, the best part. Jesus doesn't want our leftovers or what remains after we paid for a ticket home; he asks us to cash in the ticket itself! Let our hymn for this day be Christ above all, in the hearts of us all.

Amen and Amen!