

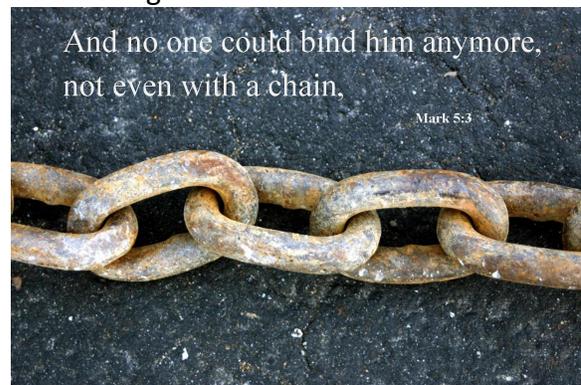
Thanksgiving – 2018

There are times in each of our lives when gratitude – thankfulness – is not the first response of our heart. The Grammy-award-winning singer Mary Chapin Carpenter suffered a pulmonary embolism while on a tour promoting a new album. She was admitted to an emergency room after experiencing terrible chest pain. A scan revealed blood clots in her lungs. People told her that she should feel lucky because a pulmonary embolism can be fatal. But instead of feeling lucky, she fell into a depression.



She spoke about this in an essay, “The Learning Curve of Gratitude,” on NPR’s “Weekend Edition.” Nothing could lift the dark clouds that surrounded her. She couldn’t concentrate to read a book. She turned the radio on, and quickly shut it off. She was isolated, cut off from the normal pulse of life. In her essay she wrote: *Clouds gathered above my head, and I couldn’t make them go away with a pill or a movie or a walk. This unexpected time was becoming a curse, filling me with anxiety, fear and self-loathing. All of the ingredients of the darkness that is depression.* Hard times and hard happenings can put us in a downward spiral that nothing seems to stop.

The gospel story (Mark 5:1-20) we just heard is the happy ending to a very sad tale of a man possessed for many years by demons. He lived among the tombs in a graveyard, wild and uncontrollable, isolated and removed – cut off from community, cut off from plans for the future, cut off from hope. The earlier part of the gospel story says: *“Continually, day and night, in the tombs and in the hills, he kept shrieking and gashing himself with stones.”* It must have been a scary sight to others and a devastating life for him.



Then, into his life walks Jesus, who is not afraid of the graves or the man; Jesus, who confronts the demons and the powers of darkness bringing light and comfort. Jesus, whose heart’s desire is for God’s children to live in freedom and peace. Jesus casts out his demons and restores his dignity. It’s a story that’s not just about physical healing. It’s a story about the healing of all those things that keep us separated from each other and exiled from God. All of our pain, all of our fear, all of our anxiety is healed in the presence of Christ.

In the presence of Christ, in the nearness of the Lord, we are made whole, restored to our community and reconciled to God. Healing and wholeness can come to us – need to come to us—even in a nation torn by partisan division and scorched by disasterous fires, in a Church slow to read the signs of the times, in a world where the

hungry cry for bread and the immigrant seeks shelter.

That healing touch of Christ comes to us in so many ways – in quiet moments of prayer and meditation, in a line from a song or a book we’re reading, outside in the presence of nature’s beauty, from the insightful words of a trusted friend or counselor. Mary Chapin Carpenter found light for her darkness at the grocery store.



She said: *“One morning the young man, who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic, also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I sat in my car and cried. What I want, more than ever, is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the **learning curve of gratitude**. I don’t want to say ‘have a nice day’ like a robot. I don’t want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don’t want to go crazy when my Internet access is messed up. I don’t want to be jealous of someone else’s success. You could say that this litany of sins indicates that I don’t want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am.”*

The learning curve of gratitude. It’s a great phrase, isn’t it?. Gratitude is something we learn along the way. Here’s how Carpenter said she will begin: *“Tonight*

I will cook dinner, tell my husband how much I love him, curl up with the dogs, watch the sun go down over the mountains and climb into bed. I will think about how uncomplicated it all is. I will wonder at how it took me my entire life to appreciate just one day.”



Today on Thanksgiving Day you and I have the opportunity to share the “learning curve of gratitude.” Publicly and privately, here in the Church and later with our families and friends or simply alone, we can declare openly that our heart’s deepest desire is to live life with gratitude for this day and for every day given to us as a gift from our God. Did you notice in the gospel story, after receiving freedom and healing from the Lord, the man begged to get in the boat and stay with Jesus. But Jesus said, *“No. You go to your home and to your own people, and tell them all that the Lord has done for you.”* That’s our task today and every day: *“Go to your home and to your own people, and tell them all that the Lord has done for you.* Let gratitude and thankfulness be the first response of your heart.



Happy Thanksgiving!

John Kasper, osts