



November 7, 2021

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Colossians 1:1-14

Growing in God: Generous Hearts, Abundant Lives



On this All Saints' Sunday, we pause to remember and give thanks for the loved ones who have passed on this year, while thinking about all of the saints in our lives that we so terribly miss. We feel the pain of loss, the thanks of their gifts, and the supreme way in which they shaped our lives. Without them, we would not be the people we are today. For my children, I think about a family friend they called Aunt Pat, they lost this year. Since they were very little, she offered them nothing less than total love. Spoiling them in all the best ways to make them feel special. Taking them to movies and excursions to wild animal parks. Always remembering their birthdays and whisking them away in the middle of holiday chaos to buy them one more present of their choice.

And as we reflected on her life, there was a desire to find a way to continue the kind of love she showed, wonderfully overly generous, without judgement, and a talent to make a special moment in ordinary times. Both Liz and Matthew felt the calling to continue it in their own lives with those they meet.

Paul offers this same charge to the community in Colossae. He speaks of the supremacy of Christ, as the first born of creation and the reconciling force between God and humanity. In light of Christ's gifts, He believes they have a calling, the same as Liz and Matt have for the Aunt Pat – to lead a life worthy of the Lord.

At first, this task is daunting. Our notion of being worth all that effort in a transactional world means we have to create value equal to the gift. But that is a hopeless task. We can never be worth all that God has done for us, for giving us this life and the promise of eternal life, and we will drive ourselves mad with a sense of failure and guilt trying.

To be worthy of God's love is not to earn it. This past Olympics, gymnast Kayla DiCello, was feeling the deep stress and burden of the Olympic trials, of being worth all this effort and money people put in to her. She had just placed 11th, falling three times, way behind her potential. The pressure had been throwing off her timing. Then her coach reminded her, "No one will love you less if you don't make it and no one will love you more." With his encouragement, she returned to her normal demeanor – talkative, smiling, laughing. But still worked hard.

We cannot make God love us more or less, whatever we do. God's love is steadfast, never failing. This is an utterly freeing truth. To be worthy of the Lord is not to try to pay back the blessings, or earn them, but to strive to use what God has given to glorify and give thanks. Paul tells us we do this by bearing fruit.

My children will bear fruit worthy of their Aunt Pat if they share the same kind of love they received from her. Finding simple, powerful ways to bring unmerited joy into others' lives. Our charge from the Lord is the same. To share the grace, the forgiveness, and

the love that we have received from Him. That is the fruit we are to share. But it is something more as well.

It is stewardship season, so yes we are going to talk about money. So feel free to start squirming in your seats. This will be the uncomfortable money talk in church today!

The fruit we are meant to produce is in proportion to the gifts and blessings God has given us. Being worthy does not mean paying God back, but it means striving to produce as much fruit for the kingdom as you can, considering what God has blessed you with. Kayla DiCello was set free from the notion that she had to be great to be loved, so then she was set free to simply do her very best.

There is a saying, “To be worth your salt.” The concept dates back to ancient Roman times. Salt was a critical commodity, essential for food preservation, among other things. Our word for salary ultimately derives from the ancient word for salt. So, to be worth your salt is to be worth your salary!

Much of the financial success that people find in New York is the ability to turn money into more money, to multiply it. You need something worthy to invest it in for this to be a long-term successful strategy, whether it is an undervalued stock or company.

God has invested in you, believing you worthy, through granting many of you the gifts to turn money into more money. But there is a different skill Brick Church has. To turn money into ministry. To turn your money into ministry, into Sunday school classes, and prayer shawls, into Fall Flings and Bible studies. Into meal ministries and sacred music.

Your generous pledge, given in proportion to how the Lord has blessed you,

your pledge, worthy of how the Lord has prospered you, will enable Brick Church to grow back its ministry.

Good fruit is a long-range investment. It may take ten years for a pear tree to begin producing fruit. It needs full sun, properly prepared soil, fertilizing, and annual pruning. Tracking moisture, and managing the pests. But when they mature, the fruit bursts forth! For grapevines, it’s three years. But overtime they can become overgrown, which paradoxically prevents good grape production. So they ruthlessly cut back the vines to position them for a more bounteous harvest.

Brick is a long-term investment that has ministered to people for 250 years and more! But recently, we have cut back our budgets over the years, not to scale down our work, but to position ourselves for even greater ministry for a more bountiful harvest.

The vines have lain dormant. Our calling is to fund our fully-restored choir this year, to grow an increased focus on our children’s ministry through the calling of a new associate pastor, to multiply our outreach in sharing the love of Christ to places of human hurt and need, and to raise our profile, like with the Kirkin’ of the Tartans and other events to encourage more and more people to call Brick home.

This is not for the fainthearted or those timid of Spirit, so Paul prays for us, “that we may be made strong!” Strong with all strength that comes from His glorious power!” That is where our strength comes from. That is why we can give generously and boldly to produce fruit for the kingdom, to be worthy of our Lord’s blessings by making a difference in people’s lives through this place. We are not passive disciples, spectators in the game of faith. Our

faith is meant to reshape this world according to God's will.

We have had several years of lean times. We have scaled back the past few years. But as you know, any company that relies on this strategy over time will continue to shrink. So for the first time in five years, we are setting a higher financial goal than the year before. As a church, we are being called to grow, to produce more fruit, and as an individual, so are you.

For as you grow your giving, it cultivates your trust in God. The metric for a healthy, national economy or company is not so much sheer value, but growth. Are you growing or shrinking? Some salesmen I know aren't compensated by their sales, but by their growth in sales. There is a theory on aging that challenges those in retirement to try new hobbies and each day to have a purpose for getting up in the morning. It has been found without it people will live shorter lives. If you're not growing, you're dying, the saying goes.

But ultimately, your gift is not about a building or a budget, but people. Your generous gift enables us to impact people in this church and past these walls with Christ's love. Just like Aunt Pat touched Matthew and Liz, so too does this place.

For those who lost loved ones this year, and those with deep emotional struggles, a prayer shawl was a lifeline, a thread of God's love to hold onto. For those who felt so spiritually dry and came back to worship for the first time in two years, the choir sounded like the voice of God. For youth who went on a mission trip with Adam, it was a sense of purpose in a crazy time. For others who missed their church friends, the Fall Fling was a time to catch up with old friends and make new ones. This list is but a mere sampling of how your

growing, your pledge, will enable us to create more and more stories of God's love. That is why we give.

This year as you grow your pledge you will grow in God and your generous hearts will lead to abundant lives within and beyond these bricks. Amen.