

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the reign of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones of dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him, they said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.

'Now Thank We All Our God'

Now thank we all our *God*, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices,
Who from our mother's arms, hath blessed us on our way,
With countless gifts of love, and still is our today.

Born in 1586, Martin Rinkart, composer, playwright, and pastor, lived in the walled city of Eilenberg, Germany during the bloody, war torn years of the Protestant Reformation. As playwright, he wrote seven different dramatic productions on the events of the Reformation. As pastor, he ministered to political and military refugees who sought safety, shelter, and food within the city. Often without food for himself and his family, he provided food and clothing for the refugees. When the plague hit, pastor Rinkart, conducted as many as 50 funerals a day. As songwriter he composed a total of sixty-six hymns, one of which Protestants often sing during the Thanksgiving season. The prophet Kahil Gibran (20th century) wrote: 'Yesterday we obeyed kings and bent our necks before emperors. But today we kneel only to truth, follow only beauty, and obey only love.'

O may this bounteous *God*, through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us,
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

Although the hymn sounds like funeral dirge music, the words are wondrously uplifting, even when everything around us says otherwise. Revs. Clyde and Matthews wrote: 'Even in an age of unprecedented personal power, there is a profound and lamentable sense deep within the hearts of many of God's children that we are 'trapped' by the 'trappings' of modern culture, and that our freedom and autonomy are elusive at best. The 'powers that be' can easily make us forget about the 'Power That Is'—the only power that really matters in our lives. In economic hardship and urban decay, in the loneliness of the human condition in neighborhood and town, and in the overwhelming reality of illness, uncertainty and doubt, we long for the power of God to lift us up and transform our lives, to give

us hope and set us on our way. It is a time to look at our alliances and loyalties. And affirm that ultimately, God is in charge' (UCC Sermon Seeds, Nov. 20, 2016). And, that we belong to God.

UUA Minister, Lynn Ungar, reflected: 'There are certain Big Questions that all of us deal with across the span of our lives. The answers may very well change over time, but our spiritual journeys are built around how we answer those questions. Questions like: What do I love? What are my gifts to give? What is asked of me? Where is my deepest joy? And, Where do I belong? This is a question for really little children who are just figuring out that there is a world of people beyond their family, some of whom turn out to be a circle of friends. It's a question for older kids who have to work out complicated social networks that bring some people in while excluding others. It's a big question for teens who are investigating separation from their family as well as connections with peers at a time when they feel like nobody understands who they really are. Young adults have to figure out where they belong as they build independent lives of work and community and family of choice. And , questions of where we belong don't go away in mid-life as we raise kids or have careers or try to figure out how it is that our lives have meaning. In societies that increasingly isolate the elderly, 'Where do I belong?' can come to a crisis point for those who have lost friends or homes or relationships that have defined them in the past. 'Where do I belong?' Being able to answer that question is one of life's deepest satisfactions. As a middle-schooler, I remember seeing teens from our senior high youth group hanging out at the church in piles, draped over one another in comfortable companionship. And I was so envious of that easy sense of belonging together, which I had never experienced with a group of people my age. Unlike most things that you wish for at 11 or 12, when I was old enough to join the teen group I discovered that what I imagined was real. There was a place of belonging, of acceptance, of membership in a tribe that welcomed you because you showed up. None of us felt like we belonged in the typical high school cliques; all of us were in some way 'weird.' But together we found a place of acceptance and welcome that went beyond our local church

group to include the network of UU youth groups of churches across our region and beyond. It was a life-changing experience for me, and one that led me into ministry. But even in that beloved community there were times when I felt alone, out of place. Belonging is never complete. We all carry both our separate selves—that no one will ever completely see or understand—and also our longing to be known, to be accepted, to feel at home. It reminds me of a song by the late UU troubadour Rick Masten, about the 'Homesick Snail'. Where, asks the song, does the homesick snail belong? If you carry your home on your back, then surely you can be at home wherever you are. But what if you are homesick in your own home? What if your heart aches for a sense of belonging even in the places where you most belong? It occurs to me that the core of the word belonging is longing. The reality is that, while many of us are blessed with families that love (however imperfectly), blessed with friends who listen to us and communities that share our values, none of us ever belongs in an absolutely complete way, as much as we might want to. Individuals and groups will disappoint us, failing to live up to our expectations and their declared values. People (and we are all people) will choose selfishly, putting their own desires ahead of the needs of the group. Even at our very best, at our most compassionate and connected and loving, we will still fail to see and understand one another completely. That's just the nature of being human, walking around in our separate bodies without the capacity to mind meld' (Quest, Oct. 2016).

All praise and thanks to God, the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns, with them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore,
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

Thank God that we belong not only to God, but also to Christ Jesus . . . The Human One who melds with us not only in mind, but in body, spirit, and soul as well. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom", the criminal who longed to belong to Jesus begged. How grateful we are this day that Jesus, steadfast in his faith in the power of his Abba's Love, replied: 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'