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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10C)

July 10, 2016

Text: Colossians 1:1–14

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What would you do, if you were unjustly imprisoned for teaching the gospel of Jesus? Write your representative? Get a good lawyer? Say a prayer or two? All of those are sensible things to do. But would you take advantage of the time and write for the edification and encouragement of a Christian congregation needed some timely, Biblical instruction? That's what the apostle Paul was doing when he wrote Colossians. He was imprisoned, most likely in Rome, in 60 or 61 A.D.

Paul states in Col. 4:3, that he is in prison on account of declaring the mystery of Christ. He's not alone as Aristarchus, a fellow Christian, is with him (4:10). And he asks the Colossians to "remember my chains" (4:18). Unjustly imprisoned and chained to a wall...on account of Jesus! Think about that for a moment.

This will not be the last time a godly man (or woman) will suffer for their Christian faith. Martyrs continue to bear witness to the mystery of Christ in the face of persecution, suffering, and death. That certainly gives a timely aspect to this NT epistle.

While imprisoned, Paul learns that a heretical teaching was being promoted within the Colossian congregation. It's hard to know exactly what was being taught but it seems that it was a form of early Gnosticism. This is a persistent heresy found throughout Christian history, including today. It goes something like this. God is a spirit. That's about the only thing they get right. Then Gnosticism says that since God is spirit, everything that is fleshly or earthly is evil; it's not spirit so it can't be from God. Humanity's real problem is that we're spirits trapped in evil flesh. We need to be released from all our physical weaknesses and passions. The only way to be redeemed from the bondage of this evil, physical world is to obtain a secret, pure form of knowledge, gnosis in the Greek, hence Gnosticism.

According to Gnosticism, Jesus isn't the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh and blood for the express purpose of saving the world by dying and rising again. He's

a lesser deity once entrapped by the flesh. But he found release from His flesh through this secret knowledge that he now wants to share with the select few who are able to understand and receive it.

Needless to say, this is a completely different gospel than the one taught in the Holy Scriptures. But this brief review of early Gnosticism will help us better understand Paul's letter to the Colossians. What I want you to know upfront is that God created this physical world good and holy. And any teaching or teacher who says that this physical universe is inherently evil or that God only cares about our soul and not our body is a false teaching promoting a dangerous error. The Lord Jesus took upon Himself our human nature, our flesh and blood, in order to redeem us from the powers of darkness so that we can serve God in body and spirit. When Jesus returns again on the Last Day, He will establish a new heaven and a new earth so that His resurrected children can enjoy His kingdom forever, in body and soul.

So much for the background. Now to the actual words of this great epistle.

Paul begins with a rather standard greeting, common for the 1st century ancient world. But there is one phrase that stands out in vs. 2, "in Christ." "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:..." Who are these men, women, and children? They are those who born again into the eternal life of the Lord Jesus by baptism and saving faith. Because they are "in Christ" they are saints and faithful brothers.

Those two words "in Christ" are so important in Paul's biblical teaching, that he uses it some 170 times in his letters. They describe each and every one of us for we are baptized into Christ. His life, death, and resurrection cover us so completely that everything you do is "in Christ." All that Jesus is and promises is now ours for we are "in Christ."

And these saints and faithful brothers, past and present, possess the virtue of faith, hope, and love. We are accustomed to thinking about those three theological virtues when we read I Corinthians 13:13, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." But they show up here in Colossians.

Paul couches them into a word of prayerful thanksgiving offered up to the Father when he prays for the Colossian Christians. See if you can hear them as I read vs. 3–5a, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of the *love* that you have for all

the saints, because of the *hope* laid up for you in heaven.” Paul rejoices in their unswerving faith in Jesus, notice the Lord is the object of their faith. Paul rejoices in the love shared with God’s saints, notice God’s people are the object, the recipients of their love; it’s not self-serving. Finally, Paul rejoices in the hope the Colossian Christians have in the things prepared for them by God, notice this hope is focused on God’s gifts reserved in heaven.

Christian virtue is by its very nature outwardly focused. Sin and evil corrupts our human nature, which was created good by God the Father, so that it turns in upon itself, always concerned with selfish desires and feelings. But the Colossian Christians are now “in Christ.” And they follow His life and example. Their faith is corrected so as to focus on the right object, God the Father. This was exemplified by Jesus who said, “I have come to do my Father’s will.” The Colossian Christian’s love is purified so as to be concerned with God’s people, being of service to them in their need. Again, Jesus our example, says, “Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.” Their hope is transferred from the fleeting moments of pleasure promised in this world to the glories of the Father’s eternal kingdom. Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be also.” This glorious corrective of the Colossians’ faith, love, and hope is Christ’s “word of the truth, the gospel” (vs. 5).

The means by which we grow in faith, love, and hope is the saving gospel, the word of the truth. I cannot overemphasize this truth enough. If you want to grow in your Christian faith, the gospel is the power and source, not the law, not your own strength and power. Paul says of the Colossians, in vs. 6, that the gospel is bearing fruit “since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.”

Dear saints, your precious faith, holy love, and eternal hope grow in your daily lives through the knowledge of Jesus’ gospel. It’s not hidden for only a select few, as the Gnostics claimed, but it’s bearing fruit “in the whole world” (vs. 6), even in your day to day lives. In your vocations as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, wives, husbands, citizens, employees, the gospel produces faith, love and hope that brings glory to Christ and serves others in joy and peace.

Because of the gospel’s growth in their lives, Paul offers a prayer of thanksgiving for these dear saints of God, these “in Christ” people living in Colossae. Listen to his prayer in vs. 9–10, “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual

wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” Through the knowledge, wisdom, and understanding found in the Lord Jesus Christ, you and all saints are equipped “to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord...bearing fruit in every good work.” Living a life of faith and virtue in body and soul is important, dear saints. Christ Jesus saved you so that you can bear the fruit of good works of faith, love, and hope in Christian knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. Your lives “in Christ” are noble, holy, and precious.

Paul concludes this section by pronouncing a glorious blessing rooted and grounded in powerful, glorious gospel of Jesus, “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (11–14).

You are the saints in light. Yes! That describes you dear people of God. For you have been delivered from the satanic domain of darkness and transferred into Jesus’ eternal kingdom. For your sins and iniquities have been forgiven – forever wiped away – through Christ’s real flesh and blood death and resurrection. Satan, evil, darkness, and death no longer have any claims on you. You are inheritors of Christ’s life and light through the gospel.

As you leave this service today, be strengthened with all power and might in the Lord’s gospel that you may grow in faith, love, and hope through Christian knowledge, wisdom, and understanding found only in your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.