

“Him We Proclaim”  
Colossians 1:21-29  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 21, 2019

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

Our text, St Paul continues his letter to the Colossians, “Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we began meditating upon Paul’s letter to the Colossians last week, we noted that the matter of first importance to him was to emphasize the urgency of learning the doctrine of Christ; yes, Paul rejoiced greatly that they had believed the gospel; but he also prayed for them (and us, by application) that we would richly dwell in that Word of Truth because it was that Word of Truth that strengthens tender faith by pointing further to Jesus.

In the six glorious verses between last week’s text and this week’s text (not sure why they’re excluded from the readings), listen to how Paul richly expounds on the focus of “who is this Jesus in whom you have your hope?” Paul says,

“[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the

beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Notice the depth of the wisdom and spiritual understanding Paul expresses about who this Jesus our Savior actually *is*. Indeed, in the simplicity of faith, our little children can express a strong, joyous faith in Jesus. But that doesn't mean they have already learned everything about him. And that's true for *all* children of the faith, regardless of age, isn't it? Do you sometimes fear your children don't truly believe in Jesus when they are confused as to whether he is the same person as the Father? Do you sometimes quietly worry about your own misconceptions regarding the person and work of the Christ? When we confess in the Nicene Creed, “by whom all things were made” and you mistakenly think that's a reference to the Father rather than a reference to what Paul confesses about Jesus in these words to the Colossians – “For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” – when you have some misconceptions, that doesn't mean you suddenly are without faith!

But it *does* show that, if we don't know the depth of the substance of the doctrine of Christ Jesus, faith in Him can easily be shaken.

And this is why Paul exhorts us to continue meditating upon Christ, the image of the invisible God, the head of the body, the

Church, the fullness of God dwelling in him bodily. Consider the beauty with which Paul meditates upon this, saying “by him **all things were created, in heaven or on earth**”... and then, he comes full circle with that phrase and says that through Christ **all things, whether on earth or in heaven, are reconciled** to God, because Christ makes peace by the blood of his cross.

Perhaps our children don’t see the intricacies of the fact that he who *created* all things in heaven and on earth also *reconciled* to God all things in heaven and on earth... perhaps *we* don’t meditate deeply enough what it means that Christ has “made peace by the blood of his cross.”

And that is why we must be exhorted to continue studying and meditating upon the depths of this wisdom and knowledge and spiritual understanding. Because apart from Christ, are we not completely lost?

On *that* point our text continues: “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.”

How weighty is that verse? Before Law and apart from the Law (which points us to our need for Christ), sinners don’t believe they *need* to be called to repentance, and they certainly don’t think they *should* be called to repentance. They judge themselves one with God in thought, word, and deed. But, truly, they are “alienated and hostile in minds, doing evil deeds.” You can recognize that in the

world out there, but Paul says it of the Colossians (by application, of *you*)... that the faithful were once the unfaithful; those whose minds are *safeguarded* in Christ Jesus were those once *hostile* in mind; those who now desire *good works* were those who once relished *doing evil deeds*.

But now he has reconciled you in his body of flesh by his death. Yes, his body of flesh – as graphic an image as when Paul says that Christ has made peace ‘by the blood of his cross.’ When we speak of Christ’s body, the Scriptures will not allow us to think of his body as a divinely spiritual body, or as the heavenly bodies of the skies and galaxies above. Nor will the Scriptures allow us to think of his body as an image of gold, like the golden calf of Baal. Nor will they allow us to think of his body as stone like the columns dedicated to Zeus at Olympia.

Early in the process of discussing whether we would have a crucifix, the question arose if we could go with a silver or gold corpus, perhaps easier on the eyes. We responded, “Sure, we *can*, there’s no sin in that... but what teaches *best* what the Scriptures proclaim?” ... Hear Paul’s words again: that by the blood of his cross and in his body of flesh Christ reconciled us to the Father by his death. If, at Christmas, we are going to appreciate the incarnation, ought we not tie it directly to Paul’s words to the Colossians? – the blood of the cross and the body of flesh are Christ’s weapons in the

face of sin and in the court of God's judgment, that Jesus' death might reconcile us to the Father.

And by doing this he "presents you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." How rich is his blood and how sufficient his sacrifice, that you would be presented holy and blameless and above reproach!

You know your sins. You know that, should any random stranger survey your week or your life, they would *not* consider you holy and blameless and above reproach. You know that your standing before the judge *deserves* to yield a sentence of condemnation (which is exactly why so many cringe at the idea that Christ will come again to be our *judge*). And yet, does St Paul not say that Christ – by his blood and sacrifice – presents you holy, blameless, above reproach "*before him*." He is the judge. And yet, He – your judge – is the one who took on flesh and laid down himself to present you holy and blameless before his own judgment.

This gracious judgment of Christ is freely yours through the reconciliation of his blood of the cross and his body of flesh... "if" Paul says, "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven."

Yes, there is an "if" to confess in the Christian faith. The Scriptures do not teach a 'once saved, always saved' doctrine, but rather warn us not to be infantile in the faith, "tossed to and fro by

the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Paul warns the Ephesians), and again, the writer to the Hebrews warns us to “pay much closer attention to what you have heard, lest you drift away from it” and neglect salvation. And now, we hear Paul tell the Colossians not to shift “from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.”

How urgently does Paul exhort us to continue in the faith, to desire the spiritual knowledge and understanding and wisdom by which the Holy Spirit will keep us stable and steadfast, so that we do not follow the myths and lies of this world and will not thereby shift from the hope of the gospel that we heard... that same gospel that (Paul said last week) is “indeed *in the whole world* bearing fruit and growing.” Doesn’t Paul now return to that when he concludes this section, pleading you to “continue in the faith, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed *in all creation*”?

Therefore, if the gospel has come to you no differently than it has come to any other broken and penitent sinner under heaven... and if faith is created in Christ Jesus and built up through knowledge and spiritual understanding of him and his doctrine... then every minister, whether Epaphras or Paul or any other, ought gladly rejoice that he is able to labor for this Gospel. That’s where Paul turns next:

“I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church”

When Paul says that, he does not mean that Christ's suffering and death was insufficient. How *could* Paul mean that considering what he just said about the blood of the cross and Christ's divinely-purposed body of flesh?

Rather, Paul refers to the suffering of the Church as the body of Christ, and – as it is the mystical body of Christ – in that way it is to share in his afflictions, suffering for the sake of the gospel He has earned for us. But, we Christians – when suffering confronts us – isn't that when and how we often begin to drift? We forget to focus on who Christ is, what He has accomplished for us, what he continues to promise for us – we forget to meditate on that and we begin to focus on worldly gospels that promise to alleviate our suffering (“If you'll just act the way your peers want you to act, and say that marriage is for the world to define its beginning and end, and that all religions are equal, and that boys can be girls and girls boys, we'll stop pressuring and harassing you and labeling you as bigots and you can enjoy a happy life”). And, by allowing those empty promises built on faulty foundations to distract us from Christ, we thereby begin to drift away and be tossed to and fro by winds of false doctrine, and – no longer stable and steadfast – we are unwilling to suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and our afflictions are lacking.

Indeed, if we do not learn richly of Christ, we are not willing to suffer for the gospel. And if you see in your life an unwillingness to

suffer for the gospel, it may be indication that you do not know richly and deeply what *is* the gospel and why it's so worth suffering for! Let us repent for loving the gospel only insofar as it makes life more comfortable, but being less willing to be steadfast in faith of that gospel when we know such confession will heap upon our daily life the world's disdain. Let us repent, and let us thank God for St Paul who says, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake"... not as if your redeemer, but for the sake of bearing the confession of the gospel on behalf of those too timid to do so.

We thank God for that, not because our faith is in St Paul, but because St Paul's ministry was "to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to the saints." That's no hyperbole; that's how glorious the gospel of Christ is, how much you may cherish it and grow bold for its preaching and teaching and hearing and learning and bearing and confessing – that *it* is the 'mystery hidden for ages and generations', the great truth of this world's meaning and history and future, its inner heart... and this wondrous truth has been revealed to *you*.

All the peoples out there long for, chase after and hope to find that 'golden truth' that brings meaning and purpose and hope to mankind, and *you* have been given it by God through the preaching of St Paul; no wonder he rejoiced in his suffering, for he knew what a weighty responsibility and privilege was his... and he knew what a glorious gift and treasure was yours: "To them [the saints] God chose

to make known how great among the Gentiles (that's you!) are the riches of the glory of this mystery" – that's your treasured possession as learners of the gospel. And what is that mystery? – "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Notice that! We so often preach "Christ for you" that we may stumble on "Christ in you"... but here "Christ in you" does not mean "Look at your great Christian progress"... here, 'Christ in you' means that you have the firm ground of baptism and baptismal faith on which is built "the hope of glory", as we confess: "I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

And that glorious confession rests with Christ Jesus: "Him we proclaim" Paul says, but notice how Paul says it, echoing the admonition to long for knowledge and spiritual understanding: "...warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

Be warned, friends – do not rest on your laurels of 'Christian status' or in the comforts of this life. Rather, you have every reason to rejoice in being carried baptismally and taught with all wisdom, just as Christ promised you when he gave his messengers charge: "Going therefore, make disciples of all nations... baptizing them and teaching them all things whatsoever that I have commanded you." All things whatsoever... that's not the stuff of infantile faith... that's the stuff of preaching and teaching and hearing and learning... that's the stuff of richly dwelling in the Word of God... "that we may

present everyone mature in Christ.” Mature, perfect, on that final day when the preaching of the messengers gives way to the gracious judgment of the One who redeemed you with his body of flesh and the blood of his cross.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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