

9th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Colossians 1:15-28

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 or 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 to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

There was a controversy boiling in the Christian community of the Colossians. The young congregation was part of the spreading Christian movement in the years following Christ's death and resurrection. They had organized and begun to worship Christ together. Unlike us who worship openly in the center of the community free from fear of persecution, the Colossians likely worshiped in secrecy in one another's homes. Unlike the United States of America where people are free to worship how they choose, the Roman Empire viewed the new Christian religion as a seditious movement that brought into question the sovereignty of the Empire.

As their worship of the Risen Christ progressed, a conflict began to erupt within the congregation. We don't know the specifics of what the conflict was, but from studying Paul's Letter to the Colossians as a whole we can surmise that there was a dispute over whether or not Christ's life, death, and resurrection was fully sufficient to give the followers proper access to God.

Apparently, there were members of the community that begun preaching that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was "not enough." "Sure," they said, "Christ's sacrifice and resurrection help, but that alone cannot secure us full wisdom and full access to God." In the opinion of these false teachers, other things were needed to supplement the work of Jesus Christ. Things like different philosophies,

observances of holy times, and worship of heavenly bodies such as the sun and the moon, were needed to achieve full wisdom and divine access.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've never felt the particular urge to supplement my Christian belief with ascetic philosophies or moon worship. However, our modern culture is certainly not lacking in other alternatives to solely worshipping the Triune God.

A Christian understanding is that God alone is our foundation, our source and being, our hope, and our life. In God, we find our fullest selves and anything else that we try to use to "complete" ourselves only leads us further away from the identity God has given us to live in to.

Think about almost any commercial on TV. The goal of the people who created that commercial was probably to try to convince you that you are truly "incomplete" without their product.

In many bookstores, one of the largest sections is likely the "self-help" section, which is filled to the brim with books that promise simpler, healthier, thinner, more productive, more peaceful, and more satisfied lives.

Or, for a final example, the world is filled with many preachers that insist that what you need to be more successful in your faith is simply nothing more than a more positive attitude. "You are too blessed to be stressed," they say. "Simply smile and keep your chin up and God's blessings will come to those who put themselves in a mindset to receive them," they preach. This philosophy is really not about the Gospel, but about our human tendency to seek the easy answer in a complex and difficult world.

The world of the Colossians, while different from ours today in many ways, was nevertheless also a complex and difficult world. As I mentioned before, the Colossians feared persecution from the Romans on a daily basis. Furthermore, their religion was a new one, a religion that was still in the adolescent stage of discovering what it believed. Two thousand years after Jesus' death and resurrection, we are gifted with centuries of theological work that has added to the foundation of our faith. However, the Colossians were essentially building an airplane mid-flight.

And thus, the atmosphere was perfect for theological dispute. Therefore, people had begun to plant ideas within the church that Christ was "not enough." Christ was "not enough" for your salvation. Christ was "not enough" to give you access to God. Christ was "not enough" to forgive you of your sins. This theology of "not enough" had to be quelled, and such was one of the main reasons for the writing of the Letter to the Colossians.

Today's passage from this letter is, by far, its most famous part; and for good reason. Verses 15 through 20 of chapter 1 form what is known as the "Christ hymn." The reason it is called as such is because we believe that Paul did not write these words. Instead, Paul was quoting the lyrics of one of the first hymns about Jesus Christ that was sung in the early church. Unfortunately, we do not know the tune to which it was first sung. But we do, fortunately, know the lyrics:

*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 or 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 to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

This hymn seeks to speak against the false theology of Christ as “not enough.” It reminds the Church that Jesus Christ, himself, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. Though many of us might be tempted to think that Jesus was “created” when he was born in the manger with Joseph and Mary, the truth is that actually Christ is much, much older than that. We believe that Jesus is what is referred to as “co-eternal” with the other two members of the Holy Trinity (that is, the Father and the Holy Spirit). Therefore, that means that Jesus Christ was, indeed, present since before the beginning of time. If this seems weird to you, remember the words of the first chapter of John when the gospel writer speaks of Jesus Christ as the “Word.” “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Paul is quoting this hymn to remind the Colossians that the Christ they worship precedes all other creatures, all other nations, all other philosophies. Basically, Paul is reminding the Colossians that Jesus Christ comes before, rules over, and will last long after anything else that competes for their trust, loyalty, and faith.

The hymn goes on to say that “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.” Paul wants to make sure that the Colossians make no mistake about it. Jesus Christ was not a mere prophet. Jesus Christ was not just a superior moral instructor. Jesus Christ was not just a “good guy” who taught us “good things” about a “good God.” Jesus Christ, himself, is the manifestation of the true fullness of God. Simply put, God is incomplete with Jesus. The reconciling work of Jesus Christ has been part of the plan since the beginning. Put another way, God did not just simply one day decide to create Jesus to save humanity. Rather, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the plan from the get-go.

Paul seeks to remind the Colossians of this truth because it seems that some of them have forgotten the true scope of Jesus Christ’s salvation. Some of them have been swayed by false teachings that have convinced them that Jesus Christ only saved them partially. However, Paul reminds them that this Jesus Christ, this image of the invisible God, this eternal Redeemer, is the supreme ruler over any throne, dominion, ruler, or power. In a contest between Christ and the Roman Empire, Christ wins. In a contest between Christ and the United States of America, Christ wins. In a contest between Christ and, well, *anything*, Christ wins. Christ is the supreme Head of the church and the very foundation of all of creation.

Furthermore, the hymn states, God is pleased to reconcile to himself all things through the body and being of Jesus Christ. The blood of the cross, as the hymn puts it, makes peace through the reconciling of God to creation. Jesus Christ is the example of God taking the initiative to redeem us as a creation that has so often wandering from God’s flock.

After the hymn concludes in verse 20, Paul continues by encouraging the Colossians to remain in the faith and to take care not to shift from hope into fear.

One of the reasons I need to be reminded of Jesus Christ’s complete sovereignty is that I am tempted on a daily basis to shift from hope to fear. I trust I am not the only person in this room who experiences this temptation. Another mass shooting happens, and I find myself tempted to shift from

hope to fear. Another politician tells me that I should fear Muslims and Mexicans and gay people and transgendered people, and I find myself tempted to shift from hope to fear. A tractor trailer stampedes into a group of French people celebrating Bastille Day and leaves 84 people dead, and I am tempted to shift from hope to fear. Violence breaks out in Turkey and chaos ensues, and I am tempted to shift from hope to fear.

Now, that being said, we should probably not be too hard on ourselves. I'm sure the Colossians were likewise tempted to shift from hope to fear. The Roman Empire thrived on the infectious reality of fear. Their political and military might instilled fear and kept hope at bay. However, Paul's words to the Colossians reminded them, and indeed they remind us today, that Christ is bigger than any political entity. Paul reminds that anything or anyone in which or whom we place our trust other than Christ is, one day, coming to an end. Anything or anyone else that we look to for salvation other than Christ is a foolish investment. Everything else is temporary, Christ is eternal. Everything else is subject to Christ, Christ is the head and stands at the right hand of God the Father. Yes, violence is strong, but Christ is stronger. Yes, hatred is strong, but Christ is stronger. Yes, sin is strong, but Christ is stronger. When we forget these things, we shift from hope to fear.

And Paul knew something about shifting from hope to fear. Before he was converted to the Way on the road to Damascus, Paul worked for the Roman Empire as a practitioner of their fear-mongering. He went hither and thither, using fear to persecute and imprison Christians. That was his work of fear. He gave into fear's temptation because he thought that the Roman Empire was the eternal power in heaven and earth.

However, one day, on the road to Damascus to yet again persecute Christians, Paul was invited to shift from fear to hope. Paul was introduced to Jesus Christ who, alone, is the truly sovereign One. Paul was introduced to the firstborn of all creation, the very image of the invisible God. Paul was introduced to hope because Paul came to understand that everything else was under the authority of Jesus Christ.

Friends, may we together sing this song of Christ's sovereign authority. May we, like the Colossians, be reminded that we are called to serve Christ in his eternal realm. When you turn on the news and you, like me, are disheartened and saddened by the fear, the hate, the violence, and the ignorance, may we be reminded of what Desmond Tutu wrote in hymn number 750 in our hymnals.

*Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours; victory is ours
through God who loves us.*

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, remember who will have the final word. Remember that we have been promised that that word will be good. Remember that we know that Christ will usher in the day when tears will be no more. You and I are meant to be vehicles of Christ's goodness, love, light, and life. We have a choice: we can shift into fear and contribute to the violence that seeks to destroy us. Or, we can shift into hope and commit to a different narrative, a narrative that proclaims Christ as the sovereign Lord of all creation, a prince of peace, a God of love, a Spirit of reconciliation in a broken world.

May we proclaim the narrative we have received in Jesus Christ.

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