

# “It’s Good To Be Together”

Colossians 4:7-18

Rev. Rick Hull ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ June 18, 2023

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

<sup>7</sup> Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; <sup>9</sup> he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

<sup>10</sup> Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him. <sup>11</sup> And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

<sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. <sup>13</sup> For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

<sup>14</sup> Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you. <sup>15</sup> Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. <sup>16</sup> And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

<sup>17</sup> And say to Archippus, “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.  
(Colossians 4:7-18, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The close of the Colossian Letter reads like a first century Church Directory. There are many friends, just no pictures. In over 55 years of ministry, I’ve been blessed by so many brothers and sisters, here and abroad. With Paul, I too have a directory.

Reading his words, I can see their faces again. And I find myself reflecting with him on a marvelous fellowship that now spans both the distances of earth, and the centuries of time. I think I know how he must have felt when he wrote. It is, indeed, good to be together!

In some ways, we have all become more aware of that in these very trying years. Covid reduced our connections and kept our fellowship apart. The emergence of Zoom and Live Streaming made it easier to nestle in the LazyBoy recliner and “*worship in our jammies.*” (And, yes, there *is* a reason they call it “*Lazy* Boy”!) Of course, our outreach has also been extended in new ways, but there *was* that loss of personal connection.

As we emerge from those challenging times, *it truly is good to be together.* And that’s what compels our study this morning. For a few minutes here, let’s walk through the rolodex of Paul’s valued first century companions and colleagues. And, perhaps discover their special value to us in the questions they will encourage us to ask.

Let’s begin with: **TYCHICUS.**

Here’s what we know about him. He was a beloved brother, a fellow servant of Christ. A faithful churchman, he is also a favorite of mine – an Interim Pastor. He filled in for Titus on Crete, and for John at Ephesus.

He was a communicator. He carried the letters to both Ephesus and Colossae. Paul remembers him fondly as a teaching minister who brought the saints together.

And he reminds me of **Douglas and Margaret.** These aged saints were two of the sweetest, most profound believers who ever inspired me. Doug was a teacher – a scholar of ancient languages (I was always careful in quoting Greek around him).

Together they started a Christian school in Hawaii. Every church they joined in their travels was blessed by their witness, their Bible teaching, and their prayer groups. Every pastor was encouraged. In what they taught, and who they were, they were the glue that cemented so many Christian lives together! They will always be my Tychicus!

So, here's the question from **Tychicus**, and **Douglas**, and **Margaret**:

**“What word from God do I have?  
Can I see myself as someone with a message  
from God to deliver to the people in my life?”**

Next, there is: **ONESIMUS**.

He is the run-away slave, who found Paul in Rome, became a believer, and was sent back to Colossae, to his owner Philemon, to be welcomed as a brother!

The name Onesimus means *“the useful one.”* He became not only useful, but truly faithful. And that is something, after being a run-away.

Paul addresses Philemon, saying that Onesimus has become a beloved brother *and* “one of you.” No slave would ever be called “one of you”! This is a picture of restoration, new life in Christ, and the courage that it brings.

Sent back to an uncertain future, Onesimus becomes a model of divine transformation, and the power of the Holy Spirit to turn a life around.

Here I think of my friend **Rex**. He was a pillar of the church, but his story included rebellion, and a misspent youth on the path to destruction. His testimony was the transforming power of God, when he came to know and follow Christ.

Rex, and the team he formed, became the backbone of an emerging television and streaming ministry at our church. What God did with him reached to many beyond our doors.

Here's the question from **Onesimus** and **Rex**:

**“Because our Lord is in the transformation business, can I see the possibilities in the impossibles, in the people, and in the circumstances God has given me?”**

**And what will I do with them?”**

By the way, it is believed that this Onesimus *was* received as a brother when he returned home, and eventually became the Bishop of the ancient Church of Ephesus! That's a pretty good transformation!

Next on our list is: **ARISTARCHUS**.

Paul calls him the “fellow prisoner.” We know that he stood with Paul in the riots in Ephesus, was captured by the mob, badly beaten, and barely escaped with his life. We know that he was there for Paul on the treacherous sea voyage to Rome – and in Paul's Roman imprisonment. He is the model of standing firm in faithful care!

My Aristarchus is a group of **fellow pastors**. This April, at the 52<sup>nd</sup> annual gathering of our West Coast Presbyterian Pastors Fellowship I greeted an old friend. I remembered fondly the times we spent together in Seattle so long ago, and hadn't seen Jim for a year.

“How are you doing these days?” He said, “As well as can be expected, I suppose.” I said, “Oh??” He said, “Yes. My wife Debbie died two weeks ago.” Wow.

For a whole week at Zephyr Point, I watched one Aristarchus after another gather around our brother just to be there, to walk with him, care for him, and lift him up.

Here's a question that is worthy of **Aristarchus**, and all my **pastor friends**:

**“How is my Lord calling me to stand with those who need me, even when I'm tired, or uncertain, or busy, or scared?”**

Down a little further in our church directory is: **MARK**.

Mark will always represent redeeming restoration. We remember that he started out with Paul on that first missionary journey, and then, in the popular vernacular, he “wimped out.” He couldn't take the sacrifices of the ministry and ran back to his mom's up-scale home in the Jerusalem suburbs. It would take Paul a long time to forgive him and trust him.

Mark was a quitter and a failure. But he was mentored by the one man who might truly understand – the monumental failure: St. Peter. Having denied his Lord, he knew what fear and cowardice was like.

It took time. But in time Mark recovered. How well? So well that Paul reached out to him and brought him back. And then told the Colossians “*welcome him!*” And, Mark, we know, became the writer of the reflections of Peter – the very first gospel. Great contributions are often made by the ones we call “losers.”

My friend **Gary** was a loser. In his jail cell, at the end of his rope, rejected and alone, with his life in tatters he had no future and nowhere to go. Until he cried out to God. In a divine miracle, he was released, gave his heart to Christ, and for the rest of his life brought gospel-grounded transformation to so many who were without hope.

**Mark** and **Gary** both help me raise the question:

**“Am I willing to believe that the places where I have failed or fallen short are the very places of renewal that God can turn into blessings?”**

**BARNABAS** comes next.

He is only mentioned in passing. But we know a lot about him. He was named “*the son of encouragement*” for a reason. He lifted up and encouraged the emerging church. He held onto his cousin Mark through those failures. And his uplifting spirit became a gift to every church that he helped to plant, and every life that he influenced. Though he disagreed with Paul about how to handle Mark, he stayed faithful to one and all.

For me he is a model of how we hold onto, and lift up each other even when there are divisions in the church - - when we may disagree -- when we are separated by biases or misunderstandings.

We just need more encouragers – and that is the way Paul would remember him.

My good friend **Dan** retired from pastoral ministry not long ago. He moved to a remote part of the northwest, and he and his wife joined a small church there. Dan is an accomplished teacher and preacher. And he is a

veteran of just about all the challenges that our churches can throw at us.

He told me that the first thing he did when they chose their church home, was to sit down with the young pastor and let him know that as retired clergy, his only goal was to support the pastor, encourage him, and be there for anything that was needed. Dan is a Barnabas.

**Barnabas** and **Dan** remind me to ask:

**“Can I name someone in my life who needs a word of Godly encouragement today? And what will I do about it?”**

Our next entry is a virtual unknown: **JESUS JUSTUS**.

We have almost no information about him. He’s an anonymous Christian – faithful, but like an iceberg, with 90% under the surface. He is our model for stability. How do we know?

He is a converted Jew. He comes from the tradition that has had some deep personal difficulties with Paul. Yet, he has become not only a co-worker, but a real comfort to the Apostle.

Here is the model of steadiness and loyalty. He represents the huge majority of brothers and sisters that I have known – the quietly unacknowledged folks who just labor on to fill gaps, meet needs, and advance the gospel in unnoticed ways.

They are like the band of **faithful workers** who pull together each fall to cover all the details that make our annual Church Retreat possible. Can you name them all? I know I can’t. Yet we receive their cumulative blessing each year.

I imagine that there are scores of folks empowering Faith Presbyterian Church who simply make their vital contributions behind the scenes. What a blessing!

Whether or not they are identified, just like **Jesus Justus**, they lift my sights, and encourage me to ask the question:

**“Is there some small, maybe unnoticed, contribution that I can make right now to the glory of God?”**

Now we come to **EPAPHRAS**:

He is a busy pastor. He founded the church at Colossae ... and is superintending the ministries of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Paul calls him “one of you, a servant of Christ.” He is all that and more. Each day he is “wrestling in prayer for you!” There is much to say about him, but it all begins with his prayer life.

I have counseled with folks who are timid in prayer. “How do I start? What do I say? How do I approach God? I’m not a person who can pray out loud.” And I tell them that it starts where Epaphras starts: with intercession. Praise God in your prayer. Thank God in your prayer. And then move immediately to praying for others. It opens the gates and works every time.

Let me tell you about **two young Epaphras-es**. They are 8 and 4 years old respectively. The daughter and son of my brother Pastor Tesfa in Addis Ababa.

He tells me that in the family’s morning prayers each day these two precious little saints lift up “Baba-Rick” and “Mom-Barbara.” We are being prayed for by children half a world away. Almost from infancy, they are learning to stay close to their Lord!

Here’s the question that **Epaphras**, and **Niab**, and **A.T.** can help us all to ask. And it is a simple, short one:

**“How’s your prayer life?”**

Next there is **DOCTOR LUKE**:

He is Paul’s beloved physician. We remember him as the author of both the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles. Luke is a highly educated man. He traveled with Paul, even into hostile territory. He probably attended to Paul’s health and to what the Apostle called his “thorn in the flesh.” His service to Christ was to continually bless others with his talents.

In short, Paul needs a doctor, and Luke has the gifts to fill that vital role.

I know so many people like that. Some of them have blessed us by serving on our **Covid Advisory team**. Their wisdom, skills, and commitment have shaped our response to the greatest health crisis of our lives.

God has blessed us by bringing many highly equipped people into this ministry, in so many ways. In every generation, the church has been enriched by the giftedness of people who give themselves away in service. To use Paul’s word, they are “beloved.”

Together, **Dr. Luke**, and **David**, and **Dave**, and **Rick** all encourage me to ask the question:

**“What gift or ability or training has God given me to use in His service? How could I be a blessing to someone else today?”**

And now we come to: **DEMAS**.

This is the downer in the list. His name is still in the church directory, but Demas has abandoned the church. In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, we can read his heartbreak, “*Demas has deserted.*”

When Paul wrote the Colossian Letter, Demas was still a part of the team. But there is no mention beyond that. No comment. Is it possible that Demas was already slipping away?

We see it in churches all the time. And it truly is heartbreaking. Sometimes it is mid-life crisis. Sometimes it suggests dysfunctional family circumstances. Sometimes it is just sin. Sometimes the desertion has taken place long before the person leaves the pew.

It helps to remember that program participation is no guarantee of consistent loyalty to our Lord. These are heart issues. Demas drifted away toward the values and pleasures of an amoral culture. It’s true: moral decline in culture is not a modern phenomenon! And sadly, defections are part of our church experience.

I’m thinking here of **a man** who was active in our fellowship, and suddenly disavowed the faith, and left his wife and kids. I’m reminded of the **pastors** I have worked with who have deserted their vows and damaged their families with sexual misconduct.

Obviously, *this is not the place to name names* — but along with **Demas**, they do urge me to ask the question:

**“Is there anywhere in my life where my values are challenged, where I am being tempted toward thoughts and actions that do not honor my Lord?”**

**And am I grounded firmly in the spiritual place where He is putting me today?"**

OK. After Demas, we need a couple of entries that are a bit more uplifting.

And, here I'd like to add my appreciation for the members of those three named churches: **Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae**. Unfortunately, time won't allow. But, for me, they will always represent Presbyterian connectionalism at its very best!

Now we come to gracious **NYMPHA**.

The church is literally "in her house." There are no church buildings, no campuses, and these saints can only gather because private doors are opened to them. The only thing we know about Nympha is her gift of hospitality. And Paul carefully reminds his friends of that gift.

When we think of the spiritual blessing of the Colossian Letter, we must pause to consider that perhaps the *only way* the church will hear the letter read is by being in Nympha's home. Her generosity literally empowers the ministry of the scripture!

So, thanks Nympha! Your warm hospitality is strengthening the church, and blessing the believers!

I think of **her**, and once again I see my friend **Jane**. She was the clerk of Session in our church. A retired single lady, she lived a few blocks away. She knew how I loved to teach, and said, "If you can do a mid-week Bible study, I'll cook breakfast every Wednesday for everybody who will come to my home."

We met every week for years. And people still remember her gift to us, and the impact of the scriptures studied together!

**Nympha** and **Jane** lead me to ask the question:

**"What is one practical thing that I have to offer, that will encourage the Body of Christ, strengthen our bonds, and lift up our message?"**

Finally, we arrive at **ARCHIPUS**.

He had some kind of important work to do, some assignment from the Apostle. And Paul says, "*Be sure to*

*complete it!*" Don't stop short of the finish line. Keep at it.

We have no idea what it was. It could have been an evangelistic work in the midst of a hostile community. It could have been a foundational work in coordinating the Colossian church life.

It could have been something that equipped a pastoral, need-meeting ministry. We just don't know. But what we *do* know is Paul's gentle push toward fulfillment.

In our family Barbara coined a word for it. Spelled F-Y-J and pronounced "fidge," it stands for "**Finish Your Job!**" It is a great way to train children ... or husbands. These instructions remind us of the value of a patient persistence that, in the end, ushers in blessings.

I have known so many tenacious saints. Here, I'm thinking of a group of **high-school students** who I know will win your hearts.

Our church had an active partnership with World Vision to bring fresh, healthy drinking water to Kacha Birra, Ethiopia. Sound familiar? The mission committee had several years of water projects on record, when a small group teen-age boys said, "*Hey, if the adults can do that, why can't we?*" Of course, their enthusiasm was applauded, but some questioned the youthful zeal. It cost \$29,000 per well to drill for water. And it was a complex process.

But the kids caught fire. They had a project to complete, and would not be stopped. There were the walks-for-water to Monocacy Creek, the fund-raising dinners, and the full-court publicity press.

In the end, they didn't raise the \$29,000. They raised so much that they bought the well, and then sent ten of their number to Kacha Birra to share Jesus, and turn on the faucet!

We can only *assume* that Archipus completed his assignment. I **know** that these young saints did!

But, that isn't all. Their efforts raised the work of "completion" to a whole new level. A representative of World Vision was chatting with a gentleman over dinner, at the other end of the state. He told their story. And the man stopped him, pulled out a check

book, and wrote a check for \$29,000. And said, *“If they can do it, I’ll do it too!”*

Archipus and the Kids encourage me to ask the question:

**“Has God given me a particular task or vision to pursue, that will grow and guide my discipleship? And, will I finish well?”**

That’s the end of the Colossian Church Directory. And I’m guessing that we all might have directories like that. *And* perhaps questions to answer like those.

As you do, let me end where Paul does — with real gratitude that we’re all in this together, and with his closing blessing: **“Grace be with you all.”** Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

## “The Next Step”

### *A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application*

1. Read through Colossians 4:7-18 again. Each of the people in Paul’s “Church Directory” offers a challenge or an encouragement. Whose description especially speaks to you, and why?
2. Paul singles out people who have been part of his Christian experience. If you were writing this list today, are there people you know who you would include? What qualities would you note?

3. Both Onesimus and Mark represent the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and the opportunity for new life in Christ. How does the church help people to discover and engage in this new life?
4. Aristarchus and Barnabas are encouragers. How do we put gifts of encouragement and support into practice in the church community? Who needs your encouragement today?
5. Epaphras is a man of prayer. How is your prayer life? What might hamper it, and what could make it better?
6. Luke offers his gifts as a physician and writer. Nympha offers her home to the church. What has God given us that could bless someone else?
7. In 2 Timothy 4, Paul says, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted....” How do believers confront the temptations in contemporary culture that can challenge moral stability and draw us away from faithful discipleship?
8. It really is “Good to Be Together.” What can we do to encourage the blessing of this “togetherness” in the Body of Christ at Faith Presbyterian Church?

## “Table to Table”

### *A Question for Kids and Adults to Answer Together*

God gives us friends to be a special part of our lives. Can you think of ways that we treat our friends that will please God?