

All Things New

Week 4: Contending for the Gospel Together

Colossians 1:24-2:5

The Beatles once sang, "I get by with a little help from my friends." They did a couple other things with their friends in that song that we won't talk about this morning, but I bet we can all think of times we wouldn't have been able to get through something without a little help from our friends.

I've shared before about running my first marathon back in 2010. It was miserable. I almost gave up multiple times. It was one of the dumbest things I've ever done. Only topped by trying it two more times hoping it would get better...it didn't! Somewhere between mile 19 and 20, I was about ready to throw in the towel, until a friend of mine, Travis, came running up behind me. He could tell I was struggling, and instead of saying, "Well, good luck with that," and then blowing past me to reach his desired finish time, Travis slowed his pace down and started running and walking with me.

For the next 6 miles, Travis told me stories. He pointed out markers ahead of us and said, "Let's just run to there and then we can walk a little." He'd done an Ironman Triathlon and shared some tips he'd picked up for taking your mind off the pain, like focusing all your attention on feeling the tip of your pinkie finger.

And here's the thing, Travis didn't make the run easier for me, but I would have finished it without him. He didn't physically pick me up and carry me, but his friendship and encouragement gave me the emotional boost I needed to cross the finish line. That race was agonizing, but the joy I felt at the end...knowing I didn't have to run anymore...finishing the race...it was worth the pain.

When was a time you got by with a little help from your friends? Or, maybe you're still trying to get through it? We can probably all point to something. You're a single mom raising your kids and you have some friends you know you can call that will pick them up from school in a pinch. You went through cancer treatments and the constant support from your friends gave you the courage to keep fighting. You were trying to beat an addiction and your friends were with you every time you took one step forward and every time you took two steps back.

These journeys that we go through in life can be really hard, and having a group of friends to walk through them with you, it's not just nice, it's necessary. And, the journey of following Jesus is very similar. It takes a community of people, helping each other push through the pain, to experience the joy of following Jesus.

In our text today, Paul shares the goal of the Christian life. The finish line that Jesus is leading us towards. He says in verse 28...(READ Col. 1:28)

That phrase, “fully mature,” it’s one word in the Greek; Teleios. It’s a word that means perfect, mature, complete. The goal of the Christian life is to be fully mature in Christ. We’ll talk more next week about what that means, but it’s essentially seeing Christ for who He is and then building your entire life on Him. That’s the finish line of the Christian faith, but it’s also the journey we’re on.

Becoming fully mature in Christ, surrendering everything in our life to him, that is the finish line we’re running to. It’s the summit of the mountain we’re climbing. And we’re all at different places on that journey, but here’s what I’m guessing is true for every one of us...along the way, we’re going to need **community** and our community’s going to need us, we’re going to experience some **agony**, and we’re going to find a deep sense of **joy** in the Lord.

The journey of following Jesus towards maturity, towards teleios, it requires community. We need others and others need us. We’re going to experience some agony because it’s not always easy. But through it all, we’re going to find a sense of joy when we discover there’s something greater waiting for us on the other side.

I think that’s at the heart of Paul’s words here in our text today. This journey towards spiritual maturity in Christ, it happens in community. Maturity is not just a “me” thing, it’s an “us” thing. We mature in Christ as we walk this journey of faith together. Look at what Paul writes in verse 24...(READ 1:24-25 and 2:1)

Did you hear the community language? Paul felt a burden for their spiritual growth and maturity. And it’s not because he was the pastor at the Church. In fact, as far as we know, Paul never even visited Colossae. He could have easily said, “Epaphras, it’s all up to you, buddy!” but he didn’t. He felt a sense of responsibility to this expression of the body of Christ. In verse 28, he says “WE proclaim” so that “WE may present” you fully mature. There is a corporate responsibility to our faith that doesn’t allow us to stay autonomous and disconnected.

Yes, we are responsible for our own spiritual growth and we can’t carry others along for them. But, as the unified body of Christ, we are responsible to care about the spiritual growth of those we’re in community with. Those who are inside of the church, and those who are within our sphere of influence; whether they follow Jesus or not. Our faith compels us to care about, and encourage, their spiritual growth.

I heard someone say this week that **The Gospel always comes to you on its way to someone else.** The message and the hope of who Jesus is and what He’s done for us, it’s not meant to stay **with** you, but to advance **through** you.

Amber and I live on a road that ends in a cul-de-sac. So typically, when a car drives down that way, it’s one of our neighbors heading home. We don’t really get much traffic. Cars just get to the cul-de-sac and that’s it. When we lived in Bedford, we were on a through street that stayed pretty busy. It was like a conduit for cars flying up and down our road.

And, the question I've been challenged with recently when it comes to my own faith is, **Am I a conduit or a cul-de-sac of God's grace?** Does the Gospel come to me on its way to someone else, or does it just end with me? It's amazing what happens when you strive to be a conduit of God's grace instead of a cul-de-sac. The difference it makes for you and others.

There were thousands of other people who ran the marathon that day, but I only remember one. It was my friend who could have blown right past me, but decided to go with me to the finish line and it made all the difference for me. So, does God's grace and your faith end with you, or are you a conduit for others to experience it in their life, too?

Our faith ought to compel us to care about, and encourage, the spiritual growth of others. WE are all collectively a part of each other's spiritual growth and maturity.

And, we have several ministries that do this so well, but I think our Women's Ministry really leads the way in it. From Bible studies, to mentoring, to serving together, the women of Sherwood Oaks are setting the pace when it comes to feeling a sense of responsibility to care about, and encourage, the spiritual growth of other women.

And one of the onramps to that ministry is an event coming up called the **IF:Gathering (show promo slide)**. We'll be hosting it here at Sherwood Oaks on Feb. 23rd and 24th and it's a powerful time to connect with other women who want to encourage you in your faith, and who will be encouraged by you. So women, if you're looking for community and connection with others, sign up for this event. Go to socc.org/if2024 to get registered.

The journey to spiritual maturity in Christ requires community, and here's why...it's not easy to follow Jesus. It's not always easy to be in community with other people who, we might share a faith in Jesus with, but that's about it. It's not always easy to pursue Jesus together. Sometimes it's because of outside influences that make it hard and sometimes it's friendly fire from within the Church that leaves a wound. Either way, it can be hard. Paul knew a little something about that. Look again at verse 24...**(READ 1:24; 29-2:1a)**

Suffering. Toiling. Strenuously contending. These are not words used to describe a faith that's just kind of coasting into Heaven. This isn't a faith that goes to church on Sunday and then evaluates the experience afterwards through your likes and dislikes. You are not suffering or toiling or strenuously contending for the Gospel when you endure a song you don't like or a sermon that was sub-par.

Paul's talking about faith in action here, and he says it can be really hard. Truly following Jesus and being a conduit of His Gospel is rarely easy. There's a struggle to it. In fact, that word he uses for "contend," it sounds a lot like our word for "agonizing." It means to engage in a struggle. And so, we shouldn't be surprised when our journey towards full maturity in Christ is hard. In fact, we should be more surprised...*and maybe a little concerned...*if it's not.

Paul's ministry to the Colossians and others cost him something. It's why he's writing this letter from a Roman prison cell. Even Jesus' ministry cost him his life. And so, how can we expect our journey towards maturity in Christ will be any different? I think that's what Paul is getting at there in verse 24...(READ vs. 24b)

Paul's not saying that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is insufficient for our salvation, so somehow we have to do the rest. That would be contrary to the rest of the New Testament. I think what he's saying is that the suffering and agony that Jesus experienced in his life, we can expect to experience it, too. There will be a day when he puts an end to all suffering and pain, but until then, there's still an agony that we will experience as followers of Jesus that is just a continuation of the suffering he endured.

And so, be leery of anyone who tries to promise you a life, or a faith, free of persecution and hardship. Be leery of anyone who says they will fight for the Church's power and position. Be leery of any gospel that promises a pain free life. They are all wolves in sheep's clothing, proclaiming a false Gospel, and leading people astray.

If we are truly following Jesus, then we will share in his sufferings. It will be a struggle, but here's the truth that I hold onto...God's power shows up in the struggle. We have the power of Christ and his resurrection in us. He is giving us the strength and endurance we need to keep pressing on. And we will experience his power the most when we are at our least. When we feel like giving up. When we feel like we have nothing left to offer. When we have prayed and prayed and it seems like nothing is happening. God's power shows up in the struggle and gives us the strength to keep pressing on.

And when we do, we'll get to experience a joy like no other. Our text today bookends with joy. In verse 24, Paul says, "I rejoice in what I am suffering for you" and in 2:5, he says, "I delight to see how disciplined you are." Rejoice and delight are the same Greek word. Paul is experiencing joy because of their faith that endures. He's experiencing joy because the Colossians are becoming fully mature in Christ.

And I think in a way, what he's saying is...all this suffering, these chains that I'm bound to, the agony and toil that I'm going through...it's all worth it to see your faith grow. Their journey towards full maturity in Christ was happening in the community of the Church. And it's hard to weed through the lies of false teachers and prophets that were popping up, but they were doing it. It's hard to experience some persecution from people, even within the Church, who said they needed Jesus AND something or someone else, but they were persevering. Paul is saying all of this toil that we're giving...it's worth it, because Christ is worth it.

As I think about the ramifications of this for us today, there are many. And maybe you're connecting some of those dots in your head and heart even right now. But I think the question I want to leave us with today is this: Am I toiling for things that matter?

The truth is, we're all toiling for something. We're all giving energy and effort to something or someone. Are you giving it to the things that matter? The people that matter? Are you toiling for things that will outlast you and become your legacy, or are you giving all your energy and effort and time to things that only serve you and will die with you?

Are you toiling for things that matter? Are you coming alongside of others and helping them find and follow Jesus? Are you helping them grow in their faith and love for him? Are you walking the sometimes difficult journey towards full maturity in Christ, not turning back or looking for a short-cut? Are you finding joy in watching the faith of someone you're pouring into grow?

We're all toiling for something. Are you toiling for things that matter?

Jesus did. The author of Hebrews tells us in chapter 12 that, for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross. And the joy wasn't in the pain and suffering he would experience. The joy was in making a way for me and you to be forgiven. Be set free. The joy of watching his body, the Church, growing together and loving one another, spurring each other on towards faith, until the day he returns.

Until that day, may we contend for the Gospel together.