

One of the challenges of understanding Paul's epistles is that we only hear from one side of the story. There's no dialoguing back and forth like we get to hear in say, the gospels. So, in order for us to understand what's going on in the world of the Romans or Corinthians or Galatians or the Colossians, we have to try and read into what Paul is saying to them. Now sometimes this is fairly easy because Paul says in his letters exactly what's going on in the place to which he is writing, but sometimes he is simply responding to what he knows is going on, but doesn't tell us, if you will. Unfortunately for us, this letter to the Colossians is one in which Paul he doesn't give us as much information as we might like.

And that is very much the case in the passage this morning. Scholars struggle with trying to interpret exactly what Paul means when he's warning the Colossians to not be "taken captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe." Some said it meant the Jewish tradition or ecstatic faith traditions or ancient unique philosophies or on and on. One person, with some refreshing honesty simply said, "No one really knows."

But that admittance doesn't mean that we know nothing about what Paul is saying. Sometimes the best place to start is not to try and focus on what *isn't* there, but what *is* there. So let's listen to verses 8-12 again and tell me what you hear. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in Christ, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In Christ also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with Christ in baptism, you were also raised with Christ who through faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

So, what is the focus of this passage? Of course, it's Christ. One of the things Paul is doing here is pointing to the absolute centrality of Christ. For those of you who have been with us over the last few weeks you know, as a growing Colossians scholar, that this is not completely new for this letter. No, Paul earlier talked about how all of creation was held together by Christ. And that as the head of the church, this clearly also means that Christ, and Christ alone, holds together the church. And so, Paul is now continuing and expounding on that reality by saying that not only is Christ at the center of the world and the church, but that because of our faith and baptism in him, Christ is at the center of our lives. That this is what it means when we have died to our old lives and been raised with Christ into our new lives. That our identity, our value, our meaning, comes from Christ and Christ alone. That he is sufficient and so we must be secure in him and him alone for our salvation.

Which, of course, means that we need nothing else to be complete in Christ. But this begs the question of what else it is that competes with ensuring that only Jesus is Lord in our lives? What are those things that we are battling which try and vie for our identity, value and meaning? For the Colossians these were the things we

mentioned earlier: the philosophies and human traditions and elemental spirits of the universe. And it has been pointed out that the good news of not knowing what those were for the Colossians gives us even more freedom to ask what those things are for us.

Some of you, because of my preaching style I believe (not because of my hair), have asked me what tradition I was raised in. Many of you have guessed that I was raised in the Baptist church, which I think humorous because in the tradition in which I was raised Baptists were barely Christian! I was actually raised in the Pentecostal church. My grandfather was a Pentecostal preacher, three of my uncles were Pentecostal preachers and my mother continues to be in that tradition. As you might imagine there are a couple (just a couple!) differences between the Pentecostal world and the Presbyterian world. As I thought about that this week I was reminded of a Pentecostal service I went to in Oklahoma City back when I was in college. I was there with a few of my good college friends in order to be camp counselors for a youth group. We got there a couple days before the camp started and so went to worship with our friend who was the youth pastor on Sunday morning. And as we walked in the sanctuary I knew I was in trouble because we walked down and sat on the front row. Now Pentecostal 101 teaches that you never sit at the front unless you want to get involved in the actual service. (Kind of like a Gallagher show for those who know Gallagher).

So, as we are singing I see a guy come out of the congregation and he goes up and starts whispering something to the pastor. I knew we were in trouble. Sure enough, when the song is over this guy grabs the mic and starts telling us that he spent the previous Friday night drunk in the Holy Ghost and asking whether or not we wanted to be drunk in the Holy Ghost. The group to his right were very excited, waving furiously that yes indeed they wanted to get drunk in the Holy Ghost. My buddies and I, knowing that the worst thing we could do was act like we didn't want this, clapped politely. But clearly it wasn't enough and somehow he could tell that I was the most concerned about this notion. Because before you know it he had pulled me up front and, in front of hundreds of people, asked me if I personally had ever been drunk in the Holy Ghost. I tried to go with a misdirection saying that I was full of the Holy Ghost, but that wasn't good enough. "No," he said, "Have you ever been slap happy, fall on the ground, wake up a few hours later, drunk in the Holy Ghost?" I considered lying, but we were in a sanctuary and I also figured that wouldn't be a good example to the youth whom we would be counseling that next week and who were all standing behind me. So, I told him "no" and before you know it, he and all the congregation were prayed over me that I'd get drunk in the Holy Ghost. I considered just falling down on the ground and getting it over with, but after a few minutes I ended up just slowly backing up to where I was sitting and the man gave up, realizing, I suppose, that I clearly did not have enough faith to be drunk.

As I've reflected on that story and on the tradition in which I was raised, while I certainly do not speak for all Pentecostals, I will say that for me it often felt like Christ was not quite enough. That I was missing something. That in order for me to

really know that Christ was with me and that my identity was in him, something more needed to happen for me to be accepted by him and for my salvation to be complete. I needed to speak in tongues or raise my hands or get drunk in the Holy Ghost in order to be complete. There was a continual feeling that I was lacking something. While I may have known these words of Paul, I certainly did not experience them in any real way.

But that, of course, is just *my* story. The reality is that most of us have our own stories that oftentimes lead to our struggles of inadequacy of feeling like we are not sufficient in Christ, like we should do more or be more to be complete. Perhaps your story includes a faith tradition that placed an emphasis on making sure you did all the right things before you could really be accepted by Christ. Maybe your story includes a parent whom you seemed to never be able to satisfy. Perhaps your story is of a spouse who made it clear in one way or another that you weren't quite right. It might be a story of job loss or divorce or failed dreams that keep telling you that your value was in those things and that you've clearly missed the boat. Maybe it's the stories that we're often told through the media that our worth can be found in the right make-up, the right car or the right beer purchase. Or perhaps it's simply the story that for some reason keeps popping up in our own heads that tell us that we simply don't measure up to those around us, that we must have been born missing something.

Whatever story it is, what Paul is telling us is that that story is your old story, your old life and that what you have to hear again and again is that you, as baptized and loved children of God are now a part of a new, resurrected story. A story (as ??? says) that is now intertwined with Christ's story and taken as his own. That your value, your worth, your identity have been settled and is in him. That the old story, the voices from your old church or mom or dad or spouse or child or boss or the media or your own voice, that keeps saying you are not enough, has died and that your new story is now found in Christ and Christ alone.

Which is all great and true and right. The hard part though, at least in my own experience, is living into that new story. Even though I might easily say "Yes, my identity and worth is found in Christ and Christ alone," the truth is it is really difficult to feel and live into that new story. The old parts of my story keep knocking on my door, keep whispering in my ear. So, how do we go further than just knowing in our heads that our old story is dead on the cross and begin living in our new story of Christ? A different kind of community, like we want to be, can't just tell people that they have a new story, they have to help shape them into a people who genuinely believe it and experience it.

And again, just like last week, I think the clue is for us to hear not just what Paul says, but how he says it, how he describes things. When I read the passage to you from verses 8-12, after Christ, the most used word was . . . ? Circumcision. Now I know that's a bit awkward to talk about in mixed company, but hey, I didn't write the letter! But this image is powerful in a couple of ways. First, it reminds them

again of the story they are called to now believe. Circumcision was what all Hebrew boys would go through to show that their identity was, first and foremost, in God. That God had claimed them. So, when the Colossians heard this they were reminded of that story, the story they were supposed to live into. But secondly, circumcision gives us an image (as uncomfortable as it may be for us) that helps us to experience or feel exactly what Paul is talking about. In other words, these aren't just words, they tap into something deeper into our emotions which I think is absolutely necessary if we are going to really start believing that we are living in this new story.

And Paul doesn't stop there. He also brings up the image of baptism. And when we think about baptism not only are we reminded that, like circumcision, we are claimed by Christ, but we are also reminded that we use what? Yes, water. God could, of course, just have us touch a child or adult and say you are a child of the covenant, but instead we are called to use something physical. Why? Because it speaks more deeply to us than mere words. It is something we experience which taps into our emotions more profoundly. Which is why we have the font full of water right down there where you all are. So that as you leave this place you can touch the water and remember in a more profound way than just words that your old story is gone and your new story is found in Christ.

Which brings us to the Lord's Supper. This, of course, is one more way for us to not just hear about the new story in which we are called to live, but to experience it. We see, touch, taste, even smell the new story when we take communion. It might be a bit odd for us to think about, but what we are doing is eating, ingesting, the story that Jesus has died for us and that our old stories have died with him, so that we can live our new lives in him. The bread and cup are to nourish in us the belief that all things are new that old has died and new life is begun.

So often I hear people say that they don't want to take communion frequently because then it loses its specialness. But I want you to know that communion is not supposed to be "special" it is supposed to be formational. In a couple weeks many of us will go out with our loved ones for a special Valentine's Dinner which is great. But anyone who is married can tell you that what forms one's relationship with their spouse is much more about what happens in those other normal 364 days of the year than on this one special night. The Lord's Supper is supposed to form us by allowing us to live into our new story of Christ by experiencing it with all of our senses.

This is yet one more way that we are practicing with one another what it means to be a different kind of community. When we are outside of these walls it is easy for us to be continually challenged by our old stories, by our doubts and fears, by our concerns that we need to earn God's love or that our identity can be found in anything but Christ. Which is why when we come in here for this short hour we often need to do more than just be verbally reminded that our story is now intertwined with Christ. We need to experience it. So hear the words that your new life is begun and then practice it by touching the water, tasting the bread and

drinking the cup. In so doing, might we go out from this place believing and living out the reality that we are a new, resurrected people and that our story is found in Christ and Christ alone. May it be so. Amen.