

One of the things Megan and I have been doing a lot of is driving around the Zionsville area so that we can learn where things are and try to get a better idea of what areas might be especially attractive to us as we think about buying a home. (In truth there may have even been a time or two when we wanted to see where people from ZPC lived. "I wonder what kind of house the Sheltons live in?! It's especially interesting when it's dark out and the curtains aren't closed!") Anyway, as we've gone around we, of course, haven't really known where we are and so we have our maps app open on our phones and navigate our way around. I'll admit I'm a person who likes to be in control as we drive around and so even though Meg has her map out I sometimes also have mine out as well, which my wife absolutely loves! Because almost inevitably as we're driving and I'm looking at the map all of a sudden there will be a thumping of the tires meaning I'm off the road or, more frequently, my bride yelling at me to watch out. As much as I like to think I'm an amazing driver, it's just not that easy to go in one direction when you're looking in another.

I thought about that this week as I reflected on some of the beginning words of Paul in this passage. Paul tells the Colossians to seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, not on things that are on earth. And I think that sometimes when folks read that they get a sense that what it's saying is that we should just keep our eyes focused up on Jesus and not even worry about what's going on here. Kind of like staring at our phone and not worry about what's happening on the road around us. And quite honestly there are certain strands of Christianity that oftentimes seem to live like that. Who cares what's going on down here, because we've got our eyes on Beulah land, as one hymn says.

The reality though is that this is not really what Paul has in mind. That actually what Paul is saying is that when we are raised with Christ, are a part of Christ (as we've discussed) then we should start seeing things not as our old eyes would see them, but as Christ sees them. In other words, it's more like driving around in your car with the map (aka Jesus) digitally projected on your windshield so that you see the road, see everything, through that lens. When you are raised with Christ, not only is your life different, but you see everything differently.

As I thought about that I was reminded of a mentor of mine who told us that he had written in the front of his Bible these words which he would awaken to each day: "Lord, give me eyes to see things as you see them. Break my heart with the things that break your heart. Let me never pass opportunities to touch others with your love." This, of course, is exactly what Paul seems to be saying in Colossians. That because we are a new creation, living (as we suggested a couple weeks ago) into a new story that we should be seeing things as Christ sees them. Yet, one of the impactful things about this prayer is that when you begin to see things as Christ does, when you begin to see the world through Jesus' windshield, if you will, then not only will your eyes change, but so too will your body. That your heart will begin to break at the things that breaks Christ's heart, that you will begin to see opportunities to touch others with Christ's love.

And in many ways, it seems to me, that prayers echoes what we see happening in this passage. Because what does Paul say after he tells us to see things as Christ sees them? That we can no longer be involved in things like fornication or impurity or evil desires or greed. That we have to get rid of anger, malice, and slander. That we can no longer lie to one another. Again, as we begin to see things through the eyes of Christ, how we conduct ourselves must also be transformed. That we have to see differently first, but that this should lead to living differently.

Now at this point we could certainly go down this list of fornication and greed and anger and slander and speak on them one at a time. Quite frankly you could fairly easily have a separate sermon for each one of these. But one of the interesting things is to see that those things spill into Paul's concluding words that there "is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all." In other words, when we are in Christ, what is most important is not who you are as an individualized group or as an individual, but that you are now one body, one community. And it's been pointed out that all those things in the list which Paul gives (e.g. fornication, greed, anger, slander) do what to community? Yes, they tear it down, they rupture it, they are community killers.

And so a part of what Paul is saying is not just that you shouldn't do those things as individuals because they are not good for your own soul, but that you shouldn't do those things because they are detrimental to community. This week I stumbled across a video in which New Testament scholar NT Wright points out that in all of Paul's letters there is a major section which deals with the unity of the body of faith, which deals with the importance of keeping community together. Because communities of faith, as someone has remarked and as ZPC knows all too well, are inherently fragile. That communities of faith will not just naturally stay together, but all too easily can become fragmented and fractured.

Which is why, it seems to me, it is so important for us to see how Paul speaks about these things which can so easily destroy community. Did you hear what he said? He didn't just say, "be careful to not fornicate" or "try not to be greedy" or "do your best to not lie". No, he says, "Put it to death", "Kill it", "Get rid of it". This is intentional, deliberate language. When you are tempted to sow your sexual oats, kill it. When you find yourself becoming angry at others in your community, put the anger to death. When you begin to slander someone, destroy it. Can't you feel the passion, the fear even, in Paul's language. Why? Because he knows that if we are not guarded, if our own agendas, our own selfish desires, are not killed then, to put it bluntly the Christian community will be. If we want to be a different kind of community then we have to fully grasp that there will be many times when our own individual desires must be subsumed by our desire for Christian community. But this is not easy for us. Because the truth is that our culture does not cultivate a community first understanding of our world.

I was 31 years old when I first met Megan. By this point I had had a few girlfriends, but well, none of them stuck. Now, many accused me of being commitment averse, which might be partially true, but I think it's just because I hadn't found the right woman. And so the question that oftentimes is asked is "How did you know Megan was the right woman for you?" Was it when you saw how beautiful she was or how intelligent she is or how she could always make you laugh? No, those things are all true (this is Valentine's Day weekend, right?!), but none of them is what made me know that she was the woman for me. What made me know that I wanted her to be my bride and the thing she did which elicited my very first "I love you," and this is the honest truth, is when she said, "Single, cheese plain." Have you ever heard such beautiful words? After only two weeks of dating, when I asked her what kind of cheeseburger I like, she answered with those sweet words, "Single, cheese plain." Just meat, cheese and bun.

And for a long time when I was growing up the place I went to get that was Wendy's, because you couldn't get it like that at McDonald's. No, it wasn't made to order back then. Well, that's not completely true. You could get a special made order, but when you did you could just see their anger. You would a special?! Hey Jimmy, we got a special order! And then you'd stand there waiting for at least 5 minutes until finally Jimmy called out, "Special order up!" And I just knew that it wasn't just meat and cheese on that burger anymore. So, I would go to Wendy's where I could get my order just the way I like it.

Now, of course, just about anywhere you go you can get things just the way you like them. When I go to Taco Bell I get my bean burritos with no onions and I get no weird or angry looks. When I go to Starbucks I get my Grande sugar-free vanilla non-fat, no water, chai, no problem. Like you, I can get things just the way I like it. And when those things are catered for our exact individual desires, guess what kind of expectations we have when we are a part of a church? That the worship and the sermons and the people and the ministries will be just the way we like it. And if it's not, well, we will go elsewhere to try and find some place that is exactly what we like or we will slander those who think differently than we do or at the least we will get angry at the fact that things in our church community aren't exactly as we want them.

And the reality is that this is not just one person's struggle. This is a struggle that affects all of us. It is something that communities of faith, from Colossae to Carmel, have battled. We are all shaped by the culture of which we are a part and all of us have come into this community, shaped by that individualistic mindset. None of us are immune to it. But, if we are going to be a united body of Christ, like Paul implores the early church again and again and again, we have to be fully aware of our own tendencies to want exactly what we want, even at the cost of the community.

I'm going to be real honest with you. At some point, 10 years down the line, or 5 years or next year or next week, or heck it might even be this sermon, something

here at ZPC will not be to your liking. It might be the color of the carpet, a choice of songs, a particular ministry, a decision made by the Session or, as hard as it is for me to believe this, it might even be me. And the truth, of course, is that we will make mistakes. Sometimes the color of the carpet will be wrong, the choice of songs may not be great, the session will make mistakes and I will certainly not always be right. And the question is how will we as a community react to that?

As I thought about how to close this sermon, I realized that I had made a mistake in stopping our passage at verse 11. The reality is that I should have extended it three more verses. It does, however, end as a great conclusion for us this morning. Paul writes, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." May that be our prayer.