“Hidden in Christ”

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Colossians 3:1-11

January 26, 2014
A few weeks ago, I happened to turn on the TV during the Men’s National Figure Skating Championship. I ended up watching far longer than I expected to or had time for, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of the incredible strength and graceful movements that were taking place on the ice. I can’t wait for the upcoming Winter Olympics because I am captivated by watching the beauty and power of athletes who have been trained to do amazing things.

The moments of a competition are incredible, but what we don’t see is the rest of the story—the people, the practice, the triumphs and tragedies that led to that moment. All this is hidden from view in the moment of competition.

Creation-Fall-Redemption: The same is true in each of our lives. Behind each of our lives is God’s Big Story, as Pete reminded us last week. We are created in the image of God with worth and dignity, but we have all fallen and are separated from God. Colossians 3 makes clear that our redemption is not based on who we are or what we do; it is about Jesus—who he is and what he has done, and is doing, and will do for us.

Jesus lived a perfect life that you and I could never live. In his death, he paid the penalty for sin that we deserved. In his resurrection, he conquered the power of sin and death. And in his ascension, he has been forever established as the reigning king. What does this mean for us?

Colossians 3 gives us the scope of our salvation as well as the past, present and future implications. Notice the phrase “with Christ.” This is all true because of Jesus.

The past implications are that “you have died” (vs. 3) and ”you have been raised with Christ” (vs. 1). We have been justified or declared righteous by faith because of Jesus. We are free from the penalty of sin and death; and we have been raised to live a new and different kind of life—a life with Christ.

In the future, “you also will be revealed with him in glory.” One day we will be freed from the presence of sin. We will be glorified with Christ, and our new nature will become so obvious that we will literally glow.
But for now—in the present—your life is hidden with Christ in God. We have been drawn into union with Christ. Our present life is a participation in the life Christ is living through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes in Galatians, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

But if we are honest, our present experience does not always reflect the life hidden with Christ. That is why we need to be sanctified or made holy. Our present life is meant to be a process of progressive transformation in the likeness of Christ. In other words, spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. At VPC we say we are “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.” How does this happen?

In Renovation of the Heart, Dallas Willard talks about the general pattern of spiritual transformation using the acronym “VIM” as in vim and vigor. “To be spiritually formed in Christ, we must implement the appropriate vision, intention, and means.”

The process of inward renovation starts with the vision of what a life hidden in Christ is supposed to look like. Gary Moon gives a very helpful explanation of the vision as he explains apprenticeship:

*The central teachings of both Jesus and Paul underscore God’s invitation for us to leave our natural habitat (the world of self-rule) and enter into a whole new realm of existence (the kingdom of God-rule). While Jesus liked to talk about “the kingdom” and Paul preferred to use phrases such as being “in Christ,” they were describing the same thing: interactive friendship and obedience to Christ, in which we gradually learn to be more like him by being with him—learning how to stay as close to Christ as branches are to their vine. The whole enterprise looks much more like a classical apprenticeship than our modern programs of decision-driven evangelism and fact-wrapped discipleship.*
The question is how do we do that? How do we live in the kingdom of God or live in Christ as his apprentices? The vision is only possible as we make it our *intention* to live life in the kingdom of God. We can actually decide to do it. Colossians 3:2 tells us *how*: “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” That may seem abstract and impossible, but this happens all the time. Every time we turn on the TV, tune into a radio station, surf the Internet, or read a book, we are making choices to set our minds on something.

Understand that Colossians isn’t urging us to become so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good. Rather, we are being urged to tune into the spiritual reality of the kingdom of God that is at work all around us all the time and to decide to live life in the kingdom 24/7 right here, right now—to do what Jesus would do in our everyday, ordinary lives—in our marriages, families, neighborhoods, work, recreation, and on and on. Again, I quote Dallas Willard:

> A disciple, or apprentice, is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is....Another important way of putting this is to say that that I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live it if he were I.

Think again about athletes. I have a niece who is a junior in high school and a very good tennis player, but she decided she wanted to be a better tennis player. So, she withdrew from her high school and started an Internet-based home schooling program so she would have more time to practice, train, and compete. And, because she can do this from anywhere, she recently moved far away from her parents to be near a coach who can help her train and to be able to compete in tournaments at her level of ability. She not only has a vision but has decided to be a better tennis player. She has set her mind and has made the necessary choices to make it happen. Undoubtedly, training, coaching and experience in competition will enable her to become a better tennis player.

The *vision* of the kingdom of God and the solid *intention* to obey Christ and live as his apprentice will naturally lead us to seek out and apply the *means* to that end. The *means* for spiritual transformation refers to those
practices, relationships and experiences that will enable us to replace the inner character of the old self with the inner character of Jesus: his vision, understanding, feelings, decisions and character. If we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, we must identify the thoughts, feelings, habits of will, social relations and bodily inclinations that prevent us from being like Christ and doing what he commands us to do. Colossians 3 provides a good snapshot of what is needed.

We are to “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly….Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (Colossians 3:5, 12).

Again, let’s go back to athletics. The day I was watching the ice skating championships, one skater had a very bad warm-up. Scott Hamilton made a very important comment, saying the skater needed to shake off that bad warm-up experience and go out and skate the program he knows, relying on his training to do what needs to be done. That is good advice for the Christian life. The ability to live this moment is not dependent on trying harder but training well to become the kind of person who is able to do what needs to be done in the moment.

I am no Olympic champion. I’m not even a gifted athlete, but I did play basketball and volleyball in high school, as I have told you before. When I first started, all I had was vision, desire and a really good coach. I did not have natural talent or the necessary skills. When I first started, I was awkward and self-conscious and made a lot of mistakes. But, as I spent countless hours conditioning and practicing, and listening and learning from someone who really knew the game, I became a person who was able to pass, shoot, and dribble without really thinking about it. I became the kind of player who could do what needed to be done to help my team execute plays, score points and win games. This did not happen in one practice or even one season but over years of training. You see, athletes understand the necessity of training the mind and body to do what needs to be done in the moment. And it is true of musicians, dancers, doctors—we could go on and on. And it is true for apprentices or disciples.

Spiritual disciplines are for disciples. They are the ways we practice, if you will. I am becoming a person who lives my life as Jesus would live it if he were I. Spiritual disciplines are the means of grace in which
we put ourselves before God to allow Him to do what only He can do. Spiritual disciplines are the practices, relationships and experiences we engage in to give ourselves over to God so that He can truly change us into the kind of person who is then able to do what needs to be done. Let’s look at each of the areas.

As a basketball player, there are many training and conditioning exercises that can improve your game, but there are three things you absolutely need to be able to do: dribble, pass and shoot. As an apprentice of Christ, there are many personal practices that we can engage in, but there are three classic spiritual practices that every apprentice needs to cultivate in their interactive friendship with God—word, prayer, worship.

Through the Word, God gives us the vision for life in the kingdom—what it means to be “in Christ.” How will we know how to change the story of our lives if we don’t receive the vision of what that life can look like? How can we realign our lives with the kingdom of God if we haven’t studied the blueprint of how God has already been working in the lives of others over thousands of years? How can we really understand what the good life is if we don’t really know and understand the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus?

We need time with God in the word. We don’t come to the word to analyze and control the text. Rather, we come to God to receive what He has to give and to allow Him to do in and through and for us what only He can do. He is the subject and we are the object. And He uses the instrument of His word to analyze, study and transform us by the power of His Spirit.

Prayer is a way of living out our interactive relationship with God through an ongoing conversation. I have shared with you before a quote by Richard Rohr: We cannot attain the presence of God. We’re already totally in the presence of God. What’s absent is awareness. Prayer is an opportunity for us to become more and more aware of God’s action in us and all around us. As we heard earlier in the song, “What a friend we have in Jesus….What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.” Prayer is not telling God what we think He needs to know, because He already does. Rather, we share what’s on our heart—how we feel about what is
happening in our lives. We admit to Him our joys, our thanks, our concerns, our worries. And then we listen in silence for God’s response.

We absolutely have to make time in our day to be with God by listening to His voice through Scripture and in having a conversation with Him through prayer. I do this in the morning because I get up early, but my husband does it at night. The time of day is not as important as the fact that you set aside an intentional and regular time to do it. Be realistic. If you’re just beginning, try 10 or 15 minutes a day. But I think you will find over time that you will want to arrange to have more time with God. And that in turn will lead to experiencing all of your life as an ongoing, never-ceasing conversation with God.

Worship is another essential practice. In her book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Calhoun writes, “Worship happens whenever we intentionally cherish God and value him above all else in life. Worship reveals what is important to us.” The desire of worship is “to honor and adore the Trinity as the supreme treasure of life.” It’s not merely the hour we spend together on Sunday morning, but it is the way we live our lives—putting God first.

But having said that, I do not want us to underestimate the importance and significance of corporate worship. Some time ago, I read about an Orthodox priest who was approached by someone in his congregation who said “I can’t get into the liturgy.” And the priest replied, “The point is not that you get into the liturgy, but that the liturgy gets into you.” I can bear witness to you today that the liturgy has gotten into me. I don’t leave worship every Sunday with a sense of being changed or having an aha moment, but week by week, month by month, year by year, gathering with God’s people for worship every Sunday has shaped my soul and truly helps me to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were I. Corporate worship is the centering activity of my week, reminding me of who I am and whose I am, and helping me to live with intention all the moments of all my days.

This really leads to the next point. You see, as apprentices of Jesus, we not only need personal practices. We are becoming like Christ together for the world. We are not Lone Rangers. We are created for relationships, and so living together and learning from others is an important part of our
calling—in our family, spiritual friendships, and community. Our entire sermon series in February will be addressing these topics, so I will refrain from saying more now.

We need practices and relationships to become like Christ, but our experiences are critical to our apprenticeship process. Your life is the place of transformation. Most athletes these days are able to review video footage to see what they did right and what they did wrong in a performance, game, or match.

While you may not be able to replay a video of your life, it is important to attend to your life. Take time to notice and examine your attitudes, words, actions and reactions, and whether they reflect the qualities of the old nature listed in our passage today—lust, greed, anger, malice, slander, abusive language. Or do they reflect the fruit of Christ’s Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control? How does your life need to change, and how will you make the needed adjustments to give yourself to God to transform you in the ways only He can do?

We also need to accept that suffering and hardship are a part of life. Whether you are dealing with relational or financial challenges, illness, or grief, this is your real life. And it is in the challenges, complexity and messiness of life where God meets us and transforms us—not apart from it.

For others of us who are in a good place of growth and transformation, arrange your life to step out of your comfort zone and trust God to learn, to grow, to serve, to love. We can choose experiences that move us out of our comfort zones and put us in a place where the magic happens—where our faith can be stretched and our confidence in Christ deepened. Such opportunities abound—Great Banquet weekends, Summer Mission Projects, service opportunities in the church and in the community, the Art of Loving Your Neighbor conference coming up. You can arrange your life to step out of your comfort zone.

I could share countless personal and other examples of how this is done, but in her witness, Lisa LeJune has already illustrated attending to life, accepting suffering as a part of life, and shared how her family arranged their lives to trust God by stepping out of their comfort zone. They have
experienced the blessing of God’s presence and the joy of blessing others in His name. But these experiences are for all God’s people.

Living as an apprentice of Jesus is the vision of a radically different way of life, and it is what life is all about. While there are many ways to express vision, here at VPC we say that we are “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.”

It’s not enough to know this vision. We have to have the intention to change and to live this vision. That is, we have to decide to do it. Decision involves choices, and choices involve action. That is why we continue to ask you to make a Spiritual Growth Plan or a Rule of Life, which is simply an expression of your desire and decision to love God and others and to live your life as He intended. It provides a way to partner with the Holy Spirit for personal transformation.

And then we need to embrace the time-tested means or methods for transformation. The means are the practices, relationships and experiences you choose to employ to offer yourself to God to do what only He can do. It’s not enough to decide to do it; you have to actually make time in your life and do it.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that I am captivated by watching the beauty and power of athletes who have been trained to do amazing things, and I am. But actually, there is nothing that compares to the beauty, and wonder and power of a life hidden in Christ. While I am looking forward to the Olympics, I am even more excited about the months ahead here at VPC as we learn more and more what it means to be apprentices of Jesus and participate with Christ in our mission of “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.”