

2013 July 21
Colossians 1:15-28
"Letter of Reference"

A salesman was demonstrating unbreakable combs in a department store. He was impressing the people who stopped by to look by putting the comb through all sorts of torture and stress. Finally to impress even the skeptics in the crowd, he bent the comb completely in half, and it snapped with a loud crack. Without missing a beat, he bravely held up both halves of the 'unbreakable' comb for everyone to see and said, "And this, ladies and gentlemen, is what an unbreakable comb looks like on the inside."

Folks looking for a job, like this salesmen might be very soon, are often dependent on letters of recommendation from those familiar with their character and work. Perhaps you, like me, noted how much the first part of today's reading from Colossians sounds like a letter of recommendation. Paul is commending Jesus to the saints in Colossae, and it is quite a commendation. More about that in a moment.

First, of course, it makes sense to learn something about the letter. We can't appreciate its message for us until we first comprehend something of its meaning for the Colossians. The city of Colossae was located in the southernmost part of the Roman province of Asia, what we know today as the nation of Turkey. According to the first few verses of the letter, the church at Colossae was actually founded by Epaphras, a colleague of the Apostle Paul.

Authorship of the letter is disputed in scholarly circles, even though the first verse identifies Paul as the writer. Some think a disciple of Paul's wrote the letter, attributing it to him as was common in those days. Nevertheless, for purposes of simplicity, I will refer to the author as Paul.

It is apparent from the opening chapters of the letter that certain unnamed teachers have moved in following the founding of the church there. These teachers, whoever they may be, are endorsing the practice of certain Jewish rituals as well as pursuit of mystical experiences through ascetic, or self-denying, practices. In certain places in the letter Paul lets these teachers have it, his obvious frustration boiling over. It has that in common with the letter to the Galatians, which we have been reading in worship over recent weeks, and with many other New Testament letters as well. Apparently in a number of the churches founded by Paul and his colleagues, other teachers would come behind them and begin to teach theology and practices which Paul found false and repugnant. So it is with the letter to the Colossians.

From what we can gather the new teachers in Colossae are advocating a form of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism, or perhaps teachings derived from Greek philosophical thought, but certainly influenced by Jewish teachings. By the way, if you read Colossians and Ephesians side by side you will find numerous identical or nearly identical passages. It appears Colossians was written first, and Paul then used many of the same passages in his letter to the faithful in Ephesus.

You can gather from today's reading the central ideas and purpose of the letter. Christ is throughout praised as the supreme power over all the universe, and the church in particular. Malevolent powers indeed enslaved humanity in the past, but followers of Christ have been freed from them through the death of Christ, and made full citizens of the kingdom of God. In return, they now owe their full allegiance and obedience to God alone.

The letter reminds its readers that their destiny has been irreversibly changed by the death of Christ on the cross, and the ubiquitous contrasts in the letter between death and life, old and new, past and present remind them that their redemption requires a moral reorientation. And, because these suspect Jewish rituals and mystical practices do not foster allegiance to Christ, they are to be rejected. The church must orient its life around Christ alone and live in harmony one with another.

So we come to today's reading. Christ is the image of the invisible God, and the firstborn of all creation. In him all things were created, including thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. Thus, Paul confirms that these mystical powers that the new teachers are advocating are not in any way equal to or even like Christ, for they were all created through him. They are created things, and therefore they cannot be worshiped or revered as Christ alone is to be worshiped.

Paul continues, he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. So Christ is the head of the entire universe, which was created by, through, and for him. But beyond that, he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead. In him all the fullness of God is found, and through him God has reconciled all things to himself, on earth and in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.

See how it sounds like a letter of recommendation? In fact, it is an ancient hymn or creed or baptismal liturgy. It almost certainly was used regularly by the Colossians and possibly other churches as well. It reminded them, and it reminds us, of who Christ is and what Christ has done. Paul adapts this ancient hymn or creed to his purposes in instructing the Colossians.

At verse 21 Paul continues. You who were once estranged and hostile, doing evil deeds, have been now reconciled to God through the death of Christ, so that you may now be presented as holy and blameless to God. IF, Paul writes, you continue securely established and steadfast in faith, without leaving the hope promised by the good news which you heard. Here Paul issues an explicit warning to beware of the Jewish mysticism which is challenging the true gospel delivered to the Colossians by Epaphras, the message which Paul also preaches.

It is worth emphasis that Paul nowhere in Colossians, or in its companion letter Ephesians, mentions the resurrection of Christ. In these letters it is his death that is redemptive. Christ's resurrection is certainly implicit in both letters, but it is nowhere in them mentioned or discussed. It is the death of Christ which reconciles and which makes us holy and blameless.

We must also pay attention to the condition found in verse 23. The Colossians have the benefit of reconciliation only if they cling to the true faith and instruction they received from Epaphras. This condition is quite remarkable. It implies that failure to embrace and practice that original teaching could lead to the loss of the Colossians' redemption.

Beginning in verse 24 Paul describes his own suffering on behalf of the gospel, and then speaks of a mystery until recently hidden, but now revealed to the saints. In both Colossians and Ephesians this mystery is, put in its simplest terms, that the Gentiles too have been reconciled and made holy by the suffering and death of Christ. Reconciliation and peace with God are not reserved for the Jews alone, but are for the entire world.

Paul concludes the passage writing: It is Christ whom we proclaim, warning and teaching in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in him.

What are we to make of all this? There are a number of apparent applications to you and to me and Community Presbyterian Church. Here are just two of them.

Let's return to verse 18, where Paul does something amazing. After describing Christ as the Lord of the entire cosmos, he also describes him as the head of the church. From the cosmos to the church. Somehow the church is intimately connected to God's plan of redemption for everything. That should give us a great deal of pause when we are inclined to belittle the church, this church and the universal church. The church, this church, and Trinity Lutheran Church and St. James Episcopal Church and the True Life Center and Sunrise Fellowship and Calvary Chapel and First Baptist, and Christ the King Catholic, indeed every particular church and every one of too many denominations, are integral to God's plan of redemption. That, in spite of the brokenness and faltering and myriad failures of the church. This church is a part of God's plan for redemption, even of the whole universe.

Closely connected to that plan is the centrality of Christ. The universe holds together in him. All things were created by and through him. He is the very image of the living God. In him, and in him alone, is the reconciliation of all things to God.

We cannot worship anything else. We cannot devote ourselves to programs or plans or buildings or anything else. Only Christ. From that devotion will flow direction, by the Holy Spirit, in all other things. When we place Christ at the center of all that we do as a church, then we can be confident that all we say and do will be faithful to God's intention for us. Paul wants us to be mature in Christ. Paul wants us to grow up. We can't grow up if anything other than Christ drives our thoughts, our decisions, our actions, as individuals and as Community Presbyterian Church.

For the Colossians the danger was these ascetic Jewish rituals being promoted by the unnamed teachers. For us, the dangers are different, and many. We may find ourselves placing security or comfort or tradition or our own philosophies at the center.

No, Paul says. Grow up! It's all about Christ, and only about him. The image of the invisible God. The one through whom all things were created. The one who holds all things together. The one in whom the fullness of God dwells. The one through whom the entire cosmos is reconciled to God.

That is the Christ whom we must place at the center of our lives, and the center of our church.