

The Faithful Community
Pentecost +7 2019
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Genesis 18:20-33, Psalm 138, Colossians 2, Luke 11:1-13

Bob Dylan's songs are often peopled with loners, rolling stones, wandering the land and haunted by memories of lost love. On his album "Time Out of Mind" he writes,

The air is getting hotter
There's a rumbling in the skies
I've been wading through the high muddy water
With the heat rising in my eyes
Every day your memory grows dimmer
It doesn't haunt me like it did before
I've been walking through the middle of nowhere
Trying to get to heaven before they close the door¹

This captures lost love, lonely wandering, and a deep longing for true redemption. I've often contrasted his music with bands like Los Lobos that sing about the struggles of life in the midst of family. They sing,

Brother finds trouble on the street
A piece of rock to make men weak
Trembling eyes at everyone he meets

Sister holds her baby in the bed
Dreams and wishes dancin' in her head
A love forever is what he said
That's what he said

Father leans back in his easy chair
A pint of whiskey, he just sits and stares
He don't know and he doesn't really care

Mother works at her nine to five
Hardly makes enough to keep alive
She bows her head with tears in her eyes

Thank you Lord for another day
Help my brother along his way
And please bring peace to the neighborhood
Grant us all peace and serenity

Both songs paint pictures of human sin and struggle, but Dylan's song focuses on the one individual and Los Lobos' song focuses on the community. This tension and distinction between the individual and the family/community is common to all human stories and is often bound up

with our sense of identity. For some people, identity is found in distinction from family. So a person may think or say, “I am not bound by the faults of my family and have moved beyond their weaknesses.” Other people may find identity within their family as they search out family records, archives, and genealogies. In the novel *Laurus*, the identity of the main characters keeps changing as he enters new towns and meets new people.

The book of Colossians focus upon our identity in Christ. Paul articulates a notion of identity that rooted in or redemption or rescue as Christ delivers us from a kingdom of darkness to a kingdom of light. He also holds together a description of identity that encompasses our personal encounter with Christ as well as our communal encounter with Christ.

Colossians describes Christ gathering individuals to himself even as they are brought into a kingdom, a family, the covenantal community. As we think about faith, hope, and love in Colossians, we are thinking about our own particular identities being shaped in Christ even as we are thinking about our live in community being shaped by Christ.

Paul is writing and struggling to see the Colossians grow up into Christ, and he is also trying to protect them from forces that would pull them apart and away from Christ. In chapter 2, he will discuss some of the threats in the culture that might tempt them see Christ as only part of the whole truth. This same kind of threat can happen inside the community when individuals or groups use theology or intellect, spiritual experiences, liturgical practices, or spiritual disciplines as carrying a special status above and beyond Christ.

Paul keeps re-centering our focus on being in Christ as well as on Christ in me the hope of glory. Each of us has a personal encounter with God’s grace in Christ but at the same time we do not grow out from or separate from the head. We are raised together in Christ and are growing into the body of Christ as a community.

Our personal walk with Christ and our participation in the community of Christ go hand in hand. Last week I spoke of our hope in Christ the future memory of Christ’s redeeming us and all things. This is a memory of the cross and of God’s redeeming work across the ages, even as it is a future event to be fully realized in the fullness of time. We as individuals and as a community are moving toward hope in Christ.

This week I want to focus on faith. For the next few minutes I want to think about growing up into Christ even as avoid the external or internal dangers of supplanting Christ with various spiritual practices or ideas.

Paul writes in Colossians 2: 5, “For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.”² The word he uses for faith, *pistis*, can mean faith or faithfulness and in a sense both applications are fitting. In chapter 2, verse 6 Paul writes, “as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” We are growing up like a plant that will produce fruit in due timing.

In chapter one, Paul prays that the Colossians “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (vs 9-10). In chapter 2, he connects this deepening knowledge of Christ with encouragement in the community of Christ. He longs that “their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge(vs 2-3).

At times, it might seem redundant we rehearse the Gospel story each week in the homily and in the Eucharist, but Paul is suggesting that this mystery of Christ in us and us in Christ should be continually deepening in our lives both individually and in community. We continue to grow up into Christ. As we grow in knowledge and wisdom of Christ, we are growing not simply in thinking but in acting. We are being reshaped. Our minds, our habits, our relationships are being changed. Paul uses language of being knit together in love. In his translation, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson describes being knit together as a tapestry. In Christ, we are baptized into a new family, we grow into the body of Christ, and we are even being knit together in a glorious tapestry that continues to grow fuller and more glorious in each generation.

Paul even goes so far as to suggest that this adoption into Christ will ultimately reshape our relation to all things as the entire cosmos is reconciled to him (see Colossians 1:19-20 and Ephesians 1:7-10).

Paul is praying, Paul is writing, Paul is struggling to see this reality take shape in the saints at Colossae, Laodicea, and all the communities across the Phrygian valley. Ultimately, this is a work of the Spirit that continues to work and unveil and deepen in Christ across the ages. The Nicene Creed is but one testimony to this ongoing deepening in knowledge and spiritual wisdom in Christ. This work of the Spirit is making us fruitful even as it is binding us together even as it is establishing us in the faith and making us firm in the faith.

That Christ might “present [us] holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed [we] continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that [we] heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven (vs 1:22-23). This helps guard us from outside pressures that have cause some individuals and some congregations to go beyond Christ. As I mentioned last week, the Phrygian region was known for mixing various religious truths together.

Paul is arguing for the distinctness of Christ in a culture where people are pursuing all sorts of unusual paths. The danger for the Colossians is that they may be tempted to believe that Christ is the beginning but that they must continue to pass through various initiations or sets of rules such as Jewish circumcision, following of calendars, keep certain cultural festivals, discovering hidden truths. These paths may ultimately lead the people beyond the simply faithfulness to Christ and his people.

By adding to Christ, the Colossians would be in danger of diminishing the whole revelation of Christ. Paul mentions dangers in a variety of categories that seem to be a part of our lives at one levels or another. He warns about philosophies, certain food and drink regulations, keeping

calendars and other forms of ritual observance, spiritual discipline, and unique spiritual experiences such as visions and angels. Each of these can cause us to grow away from the Head of the Body, Christ Jesus and from his body. In the mystery religions, these type of ideas, experiences or observances could all play a role in elevating the status of certain adherents.

In the community of Christ, there is only one initiation, baptism, which Paul actually references. “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (vs 2:11-12).

There is no deeper more significant status than to be found in Christ. At the same time, there are disciplines and spiritual practices that could play a role in a person’s life as long as they practices do not become substitutes for Christ or the source of spiritual pride. In Romans 14, Paul mentions that some people may follow certain calendar observances or eating restrictions as part of their faith journey, but these must never be the basis of passing judgment.

There is also a danger of using our strengths or charisms as a form of status and self-justification. In Corinthians 12, Paul mentions that God has distributed a variety of spiritual gifts of grace to the community, but these gifts are never to be used to create status or distinction beyond Christ. One of the challenges facing the St Brendan’s in our future growth is to keep our faith focused on Christ and not upon our knowledge of theology or liturgy, our spiritual experiences, our spiritual discipline, or even our incorporation of trends in our culture. These types of behavior will cause some people to be treated as higher and some as lower, or it may cause us to look down upon those who don’t know what we know or practice what we practice.

At the same time, our disciplines, our knowledge, and our gifts are not abandoned, but submitted again and again to Christ. We are not to abandon spiritual and physical disciplines. We are not to abandon liturgical practices. The challenge is to submit these and all our strengths and failures before the cross of Christ. Then these gifts can be offered in humility to one another as service and encouragement toward faithfulness in Christ.

I believe it is important to keep making room for expression of the wide range of gifts and callings within our body. These gifts help us all. Instead of trying to list each person’s spiritual gifts, we might simply begin to look around us and see each person of a physical expression of God’s love to us. We value, we treasure, we honor each person. Thanking God for them and praying that we might behold Christ in them the hope of glory.

For Christ gathers His people to Himself and transforms us individually even as he teaches us the way of love over time. Colossians 3 will explore how this love involve the ongoing practice of forgiving and showing grace to one another even as we all grow up into Christ so that Christ might be all in all.

¹ “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven” written by Bob Dylan <<https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/trying-get-heaven/>>

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:5.