

Pentecost +7

Colossians 2

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Genesis 18:20-33, Psalm 138, Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13

Paul is praying, struggling, and suffering on behalf of the Colossians that the mystery of Christ Jesus might be fully unveiled in them. Colossians 2 opens with Paul praying for the saints at Colossae and Laodicea, “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,² 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,³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”¹

Paul may be imprisoned but his prayers in and through Christ are set free on behalf of the burgeoning church communities across the empire. He is praying that Christ might be revealed in these communities, in the relationships between the saints, and in their witness in the culture around them. These communities will mature in Christ together.

Paul is praying and exhorting the people that “as [they] received Christ Jesus the Lord, [they will] walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as [they] were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.² He brings together various metaphors to communicate this prayer: walking in Christ, rooted in Christ, built up in Christ, abounding in thanksgiving. Walking might communicate the fulness of Torah, which was taught as a way, a path, a walk. Now we discover that Torah has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ: to walk in the way of holiness is to walk in the way of Christ Jesus.

Next, we have a metaphor of a tree. The tree is often an image of kings and kingdoms in the Old Testament. Plus, there is a direct connection between the tree and Torah. Consider Psalm 1. The man who meditates upon Torah day and night “is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”³ Now Christ has become all in all, so the saint abides in Christ, contemplates Christ, follows in the way of Christ. In so doing, she grows up into a royal priesthood that intercedes for the life of the world.

The saint is not only rooted in Christ but also built up in Christ. Now we have an image of building. If we consider the building metaphor in Ephesians, we might say that saints are built together into a Temple, a dwelling place of the Lord. We mature together with other believers. As we grow up together, the Lord dwells in our midst.

Finally, we might also speak of abounding or overflowing in thanksgiving. This image of abounding might bring to mind a wine glass that overflows like the miracle of the water turned

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:1–3.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:6–7.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 1:3.

to wine. This abundant wine is an image of celebration, of thanksgiving. Even as we pass through the valley of mourning, we become a people who overflow with thanksgiving to God.

Paul has laid out a glimpse of people who mature together in Christ. I think of the stanza from St. Patrick's Breastplate: "May Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ to my right, Christ to my left, Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit, Christ where I stand, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me, Christ in every eye which looks on me, Christ in every ear which hears me."

We are growing from Christ to Christ. We grow up into Christ even as we rest in Christ. We are walking toward Christ even as we walk from Christ and with Christ. This is not a word game it is a reality. The mystery of Christ's all-consuming presence is all around us. In fact, all things were created through and for him. I can encounter Him throughout all creation. By His Spirit, he is not absent anywhere. I think of the old Amy Grant song,

Everywhere I go
I see your face through the crowd
Everywhere I go
I hear your voice clear and loud
Everywhere I go
You are the light that I seek
Everywhere I go
You have found me

This is not suggesting that all creation is divine. Rather, all creation has been formed in and through Christ, so all creation has the potential to reveal Him. The Dogwood Tree in my front yard is not divine. It is simply a dogwood tree. Nonetheless, Christ is free to reveal himself to me through that same tree. We live in a world of wonder and should have cause to abound in thanksgiving every minute of every day.

With Paul's exhortation in mind, how do we grow up into Christ? We grow up in Christ together. We may be looking for some method that we apply in our own lives, and certainly there are spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study among other things. But two things we must get clear: first, spiritual growth is always in and through Christ; secondly, spiritual growth happens in relationship with God's people and not apart from them. We are being knitted together in Christ. There is a danger that God's people will seek to grow in a way that separates them from one another and ultimately separates them from Christ.

Even as Paul reiterates that we are raised together in Christ and being knit together in Christ, he warns against spiritual experiences that are ultimately sensuous and not spiritual. These experiences puff up our minds, and we no longer hold "fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God."

Apart from the body of believers our spirituality can become a form of indulgence in the flesh even though it may involve extreme asceticism or glorious experiences. To move toward Christ, we must move toward one another.

Paul uses an image of baptism to discuss our journey in and through Christ. He writes, “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, ¹² 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. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”⁴

Think about the act of baptism. We are baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an act of initiation in the community of God’s people. It is a sacrament. A holy act that is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. The Lord has welcomed and adopted you into the community of the faithful. Simultaneously, baptism is a renunciation of the evil one and all his ways. In the New Testament times, baptism would involve a renunciation of competing communities whether pagan or Jewish. In the act of dying and rising in Christ, the saint is separated from other communities and joined to the community of Christ.

The walk of faith makes no sense outside of the community of Christ. There have been seasons throughout history when God’s people have been isolated due to persecution or some other factor, but we are still bound together in Christ and should always seek to restore any separation when possible.

We are growing up into our baptism. To help us consider our growth in Christ, I want to make use of an old Evangelical tool. We grow in and toward the cross of Christ. It is possible for some people to treat the cross of Christ as first steps on a journey to the deeper truths. These truths may include supposed spiritual insights or certain types of disciplines. Both insights and disciplines are not bad as long as they keep leading us toward Christ and one another. But the danger is that we exchange our faith in Christ for some set of idea or series of actions that ultimately turn our focus toward self and self-righteousness.

In this case, the cross of Christ becomes like a trinket or emblem of our faith but it is not in actuality the root of our faith. To help this make sense, let me contrast it with the walk of faith in Christ. When we are baptized into the body, we learn of our hope in and through the work of Christ. In this sense, the cross represents the work of Christ on our behalf and in our hearts. As we grow in Christ and toward one another, we come face to face with our faults, our brokenness, our weaknesses. This drives us toward the cross. We repent that is we are turning to Christ in our weakness.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:11–15.

Over the course of our lifetime, we do not become less dependent but more dependent. In my college years, I believed I was called to reform the Southern Baptist church. Somehow, I would help usher in a great revival to that community. That was not to be. In fact, I look back now on what I considered my spiritual fervor and think it seems like a lot of self-glorification and a little like spiritual life.

As I grow older, I come more and more to see my weaknesses. I once thought I was a great friend to many, but as I grew older I realized how many of my friendships were shallow. I was not the great friend I imagined myself to be. Lord have mercy. As I've grown older, I've come to realize more and more my inter-dependence with others. I have some gifts that can bless others but at the same time, they are strengthening and blessing me. Some of the very people I thought were obstacles in my life, I came to see were gifts from God.

In my marriage, I came to realize how independent I tried to act. Over the last 20 years, I've come more and more to see the gift my wife is to me and how I need her in my life and in my spiritual journey. This movement to self-awareness is not specifically rooted in guilt, it is rooted in a growing awareness that I am in need. First and foremost, I am in need of the grace of God each day. The cross looms larger in my life now more than ever. As I come see to my desperate need for God's grace in Christ Jesus, I also come to see my need for the people of God around me, and my call to pour out my life into the lives of God's people.

Within this context of dependence on Christ Jesus and His people, the spiritual traditions of contemplation, holiness, charismatic, Scripture, and sacraments all play a role in our formation, but they must always be rooted in Christ. Let us pursue Christ Jesus together and as we do let us learn how to love another and submit to one another and serve one another.