

November 21, 2010
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Colossians 1:3-20

Thankful for Jesus and You

An introduction to 'Colossians' usually begins with letting us know that Colossae was the town of Phrygia in Asia Minor (in other words in the central part of modern day Turkey). That there in Colossae there was a community of faith (faith in Jesus Christ) that had been founded not by Paul but by Epaphras.

It is Epaphras who informs Paul about the happenings in Colossae and the community of faith that is there.

It is Epaphras who tells Paul about the exemplary faith of the Colossians, about the fruits – the love and hope that their faith is bearing.

It is also Epaphras who tells Paul about the challenges that this community of faith is facing. It is hard for us who are reading this letter to know exactly what these challenges are but we can infer as we read into the letter a bit further (chapter 2) that there is a faction within the faith community that is teaching things that are not in harmony with Paul's understanding of who Christ is and what Christ has done. In other words there are those who are teaching things contrary to the Good News of Jesus.

These teaching are a combination of philosophy (or a set of principles that determines how one lives), mixed with a pinch or two of esoteric teaching (a mysterious and most unreachable way of

living) to which you then add asceticism (practices of self denial). Top it off with a religious mixture of Jewish ritual practices and Gnosticism (a religious movement centered in esoteric practices which seeks to free one from the material world). Blend well and there you have it!

Exciting isn't it! (Are you ready for the test?)

The fact of the matter is we are faced with many of the same things today. What is important for you to know is that the community of faith was facing many of the things that we face today.

All of us construct philosophies by which we live. Maybe some of the easiest to identify are around the labels of liberal or conservative – and those labels might be attached to things like politics – but also to things like how we understand and use our money – what we do with our time – where we find ourselves in regard to our faith.

It can be an interesting mixture. When it comes to social justices I would say I am liberal. When it comes to money I am conservative. When it comes to religion I would say that I am a centrist – somewhere in the middle depending on the issue.

In the New Age movement with its focus on energy – the energy within us and other things – the energy that liberates us. It's focus on crystals or astrology – in all this – we find esoteric teachings. But we can also find hints of esotericism in the area of learning. Learning is about knowledge and knowledge is about power and power liberates us from the circumstances around us.

I happen to believe that education is really important and committed myself to educating and to being educated as a life long learner.

How about asceticism? Just think about the ‘living simply’ movement that calls us to get rid of and to do without. What about those that are pushing their bodies to the limits in extreme sports and activities – It’s not enough to do a triathlon – you have to do an ultra-triathlon. It is not enough to run a 5k you have to do the marathon. There is crowd on Mt Everest during climbing season anymore.

It is not say that any of these things are bad. But Paul is reminding the church in Colossea when they undermine the Good News of God’s redeeming, liberating, saving work in Jesus Christ – they keep us from living in to the fullness of the life that we have been given in Christ Jesus. AMEN!

We are in the season of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is just a few days away. We have spent 4 weeks thinking about the importance of thanksgiving and working to cultivating an attitude of gratitude.

“So tell us”, Pastor Bill, “what thanksgiving has to do with the challenges to the church in Colossea and to us today!”

Thanksgiving has us slow down and pay attention. Remember how we talked about the drive way and how it drives us nuts. Remember how we talked about how impatient we are – how we rush from task to task – how uncomfortable we are with quiet.

To be thankful we have to slow down and pay attention to what is happening in us and around us. We have to take note of what we have – we have to look underneath what is apparent.

Thanksgiving also calls us to remember. In our slowing down and our paying attention we can see the blessing. Oh yes it is easy in the midst of good days – but with the perspective of time we can even find the blessing in the midst of most difficult days.

They have had a rough week over in Mt Vernon. I was talking to my friend Lori, pastor of First Presbyterian in Mt Vernon. She was working through what she might preach on today. She said ‘I had planned to preach a thanksgiving sermon but in light of all that has happened – I feel like I need to speak to what has happened here.’

As we talked through it we both agreed that the two aren’t mutually exclusive. That by exploring what we can be thankful for in the midst of tragic times we can be reminded of how God has been at work in the midst of that tragedy.

What Paul does in Colossians is model thanksgiving “*In our prayers for you we always thank God...*” and he calls people to thanksgiving. “*May you be made strong with all the strength that*

comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father...”

Pound for pound the word *eucharista* (giving thanks) or one of its derivative forms is used more than any other in the letter to the Colossians.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col 2:6-7)

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... and be thankful (3:15)

And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God. (3:17)

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. (4:2)

So what does thanksgiving have to do with the day in and day out challenges that the church in Colosse faces?

In giving thanks to God for Jesus – the church is reminded of all that God has done in Jesus Christ.

Paul says that Jesus is the *image of the invisible God*. (v15) So what? – In Paul's day every religion had an image that represented their deity – their god – except for the Jewish people who had been commanded not to make for themselves – fashion any idol – any image that would represent Yahweh.

In Jesus Christ, God becomes real and apparent to us. In Jesus Christ we are reminded that our God is a living God – not some figment of the imagination – not a deity created by us.

God comes to us in Jesus Christ not for his sake but for ours. So we will know the fullness of God's love for us.

Give thanks to God for Jesus – **for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created**. In giving thanks we are reminded that all we are and all we have – The beauty of the world around us – The miraculous workings of these bodies and these minds – The wonder of the smallest organism as it dances under the microscope and the grandeur of mountains that fill the lens of our cameras – all are a gift from God in Jesus Christ.

Give thanks to God for Jesus, Paul says, because **he is the first – the head** – the boss – the president – the king – the one who reigns over all things – he is the one that **'holds together all things.'**

Give thanks to God for Jesus because in Jesus – **God reconciles** – God binds up, heals, forgives, makes right, satisfies the debt – he pays the cost – he fills the holes - that our sinful – selfish lives leave behind. In Christ we have everything that we are lacking.

Give thanks to God for Jesus because in Jesus we have been **rescued from death and darkness** and have become inhabitants of the kingdom of God – sons and daughters of light – those who have been given life – life today and life for eternity.

So what does thanksgiving have to do with the day in and day out challenges that the church in Colosseae and for us today? It reminds us of what is ours already in Christ Jesus. It reminds us how Christ redeems this life of ours.

Paul not only calls the church in Colosseae to be thankful and reminds them of the gift that God has given them in Jesus Christ – but he shares his thanksgiving for them.

Paul is thankful for their faith in Jesus. Thankful for the love they have for one another. Thankful for the hope they have found in their heavenly inheritance as children of God. Paul is thankful for the ways that hope is not waiting but is bearing fruit in the ways that they live.

So what does this kind of thanksgiving have to do with us – and the challenges that we face in the plethora of philosophies, esotericism, and asceticism? It reminds us of how God is at work in Jesus Christ in us now.

I want you to know how thankful I am for you all this morning. I have not heard of your faith but I have experienced that faith up close and personal. I am thankful for the ways that your faith in Jesus has given birth to the courage that you have. The courage that propelled you to leave behind, to join together, and to come to this place. The courage that continues to be evident in your restlessness and in your willingness to change.

I thank God for you – for your commitment to each other – to be the body of Christ – the body that reflects the love of God in Jesus Christ. I thank God for the ways that you care for each other – praying for one another, sitting with one another, holding hands, bringing meals, sharing the tender and hurt parts of your lives.

I thank God for you – for your generosity of time and talent – for those who prepare meals for strangers, those who work concession stands at Hawkeye games, those who teach Sunday schools and Wednesday nights, those who make worship happen each week, those who sit in endless meetings, those who fold bulletins, those who make Holiday Markets a reality. I am thankful for the generosity of your giving – providing for the mission and ministry of this church – filling a grocery cart to overflowing – sponsoring a child in China.

I thank God for you – for the fullness of your faith – how you have committed yourselves to being disciples – learning and living the ways of Jesus. For the ways that you are disciples who are making disciples.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen