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Colossians 4:2-6
26th Message
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MISSIONAL COVENANTS

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH
LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS # 10

Over the summer you have considered living the resurrection within various relationships. The foundation was laid in Colossians 3 where Paul confidently states that those who have received Christ Jesus as Lord have already died and been raised with Christ. Therefore we fix our thoughts on things above, where he is. Our lives are hidden with Jesus such that, when he appears again, we will be like him, sharing a glory we cannot now conceive. Since we have died to the world's ways of living, the mystery which all creation longs to understand is being revealed in us, that is, in our ordinary, daily living of Jesus' resurrected life.

Thus, over the summer, you looked at: Headship, Wives, Husbands, Divorce, Sexuality, Singleness, Employees and Employers. These instructions form a "household code," but we are not to imagine a Western nuclear family. For Paul, the household was a complex community, inter-generational and self-sufficient in its livelihood. For many in the West the local church becomes this extended family, the household in which resurrection life is seen through its many-faceted relationships. This household of faith is intentionally on display. As individuals, our lives are safely hidden with Christ in heaven, while our corporate life becomes a public display of the unseen. Through its covenantal relationships the church reveals Christ to those who do not yet belong.

Although our text for this morning appears to begin a new topic, in reality Paul is moving to yet one more relationship by which God intends his household to reveal his glory to the world. If there is to be fruit beyond the family structures, if the covenants of marriage and singleness, of parenting and employing, of sonship and servanthood, are to achieve their eternal purpose, there must also be what I have called missional covenants, missional relationships. It is important to see this continuity in Paul's thinking.

Our main text divides easily into three: Paul begins with the context from which mission always begins—watchful prayer, then he gives a short autobiographical exhortation, before applying the implications of this covenant to his readers' situation.

Paul, though thorough when writing on other theological matters, is consistently concise when speaking about his missionary relationship with the churches. I believe he felt constrained. He refused to boast about his apostolic authority or accomplishments, and he was absolutely content with God's provision. I feel the same constraints. Yet this text is brief in the extreme. So we will also consider passages from Romans and Philippians.

One last introductory task before we look at the texts: It seems appropriate to retell a little of Suzanne's and my story to help you connect the missional covenant which PBCC has with us to what Paul taught.

In 1971, when Jesus insisted that I drop out of college and learn what it meant for him to be Lord of my life, I came to PBC to be discipled. Some years later I brought my wife to Palo Alto so that the body could get to know us. We hoped you would send us to translate

God's Word for an unwritten language, and to disciple followers of Jesus who would, in turn, disciple others. The elders agreed that Jesus was calling us abroad, endorsed us to the body for prayer and financial support, laid their hands upon us, and sent us off.

With PBC's commitment to discipling a highly transient university and professional community, it was not surprising that we returned after four years to find those who supported us had mostly moved on to other places. To remain in the missional covenant with PBC Suzanne and I needed to be very intentional about communicating, visiting and forming relationships with people we did not know.

It is not only the "at home" parts of our missional covenant which change and must be renewed; our missionary service must also grow. God never intended to send religious professionals to a far-off people so that they would just settle down and do a religious thing for those people. The Father gave Jesus about 33 years total, most of that spent in preparation. Genuine missional activity is always about building capacity in others, the missionaries working themselves out of their jobs. You who maintain the connection at home must, therefore, be constantly growing in your understanding of what God is doing through your missionary abroad. This is not a static task. Neither we, cranking out praise-filled make-you-happy prayer letters, nor you, sending funds while offering those generic God-bless-the-Jacobsons prayers, are going to achieve God's glory. Not among you, and not among the Abaknon.

And we might show up on your door step, beaten and hurting, our marriage needing your tender restoration, our children your co-parental care, for you did not send us to do an easy task. How we thank God that you have been all this for us over the years. I think particularly of 1990 when, had it not been for your insistence that we remain among you and get counsel, we would never have been able to complete the Inabaknon New Testament.

Now we are another twenty years along the path. It is again a difficult season, but for very different reasons. Suzanne was bit by a mosquito nearly three years ago in Malaysia while accompanying four Filipinas in mission training. She was quite sick for a month, and emerged with Post-viral Chronic Fatigue. A year later it became clear that her elderly parents could no longer live alone. We had made a covenant with them that when this time came, they would live with us. So she is hunkered down in North Carolina by her limited energy and the care of her parents.

Given email and internet phones it is possible for me to continue discipling Abaknons and to assist other language teams; but all the more I depend on your prayer that my mentoring will be effective. Over the past two years a supporting couple has paid for three trips to the Philippines each year because they are convinced that investing in the face-to-face time was the best way to enhance our work. May God bless them for their insight and sacrificial gift.

As our situations in life change, missional covenants must also change. How are we to do all this? Paul suggest that these essential relationships be formed and kept alive in seven ways:

- 1) Prayerful **watching** for those whom God is calling to missionary work (that is, to capacity building in Christ's body beyond our national and cultural boundaries).
- 2) **Nurturing** these callings, setting these persons apart, and sending them off.
- 3) Intentional, regular, and informed **praying** for the missionaries' relationships with Jesus and with those they are discipling.
- 4) **Sending** financial and other material support.
- 5) **Providing** housing, transportation and contexts in which the missionaries can seek to involve others in their work while they visit the sending church.
- 6) **Maintaining** a willingness to send others short term (or longer) to participate in the mission task.
- 7) **Persevering** in the "mission" at home so that the call to go always arises from what God is first doing in our own neighborhoods.

Watching, Nurturing, and Praying

Following the household code in Colossians for employers Paul continues:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message... (Col 4:2)

Effective prayer takes place precisely when the local body, whether at Colossae or PBC Cupertino, is living the "household code". The reverse is also true: When we establish disciplines of devoted prayer, the virtues of the household code are formed and matured in our lives. In recent years I have become convinced that Christian discipleship only happens in the context of habituated prayer. *Morning and Evening Prayers* are an essential part of the IHS college scholars' house in Manila. Ruben's farmers-in-training meet for Morning Prayers, as do those in the translation office. When the body is meeting for worship in all configurations: couples alone, parents with children, singles, children by age groups, home fellowships, men, women, and this Sunday gathering as a whole, then in these contexts, where prayers are said with watchfulness and thankfulness, we can expect discipleship to flourish and essential missional covenants to grow. Prayer for mission, and for missionaries, should be an integral part of every worship gathering.

From the watchful prayer of the Trinity, if you will thus envision the eternal community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, at just the right time, the Son is sent, to be born of a woman, to redeem those held in bondage to sin. This is the preeminent missional covenant. It required a community to send one of its own into a vastly different culture. The incarnation is our prime example of a household watching, discerning, and sending to those who do not live according to this household code. This is the first step toward missional covenant: We begin with prayerful watching for those whom God is calling.

From Acts 13:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them". So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:3)

While the church in Antioch is at prayer, God insists that two of their beloved elders be sent away on mission.

In Romans 10:14-15 Paul asks:

How, then, can [a people] call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?

At this point in Romans, Paul has brought his fullest treatment of God's plan for salvation to its conclusion: that anyone who confesses with their mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believes in their heart that God raised him from the dead, will be saved. And what is his next thought? Who will be sent to tell those who have not heard?

Much the same dynamic is present in Colossians. Everything in chapters two and three flesh out the exhortation Paul gives in 2:6, "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him." As he finishes his comprehensive treatment of what this means, his next thought is to remind them to pray for those sent to proclaim abroad the mystery of Christ made alive in human beings.

Jesus often sent his disciples on short mission trips, asking them to teach what they had been taught, to share what they had received, to heal and to set free from bondage as they had been healed and set free. After the resurrection he commanded them to go, and while going, to make disciples of all nations. Some went relatively short distances and settled into communities much like their own. Others went to the ends of the earth.

It remains an essential part of PBCC's task to *nurture* these callings, set these persons apart, and send them off.

In Paul's relationship with the Colossians, God formed this covenant even though he had not personally visited them. The connection was Epaphras, whom Paul had sent to them. Yet they claimed Paul as their own, as surely as you have claimed Suzanne and me as your own. Paul continues:

Pray... that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. (Col. 4:3-4)

What are they exhorted to pray for? That God will create opportunity. Paul knows that unless God acts in advance of his speaking, preparing wills to listen and minds to understand, there is no point in him opening his mouth. Such is Paul's awareness of his total inadequacy that he enlists their help in asking God to act. But Paul is also aware that he has a part to play, and he needs their prayers so that he will do this well. He is particularly aware that God is asking him to be clear-headed, for only when his mental distraction is set aside, will his words be clear. This need for clarity of speech is all the more intense when the language one must speak is not one's mother-tongue. If God does not enter into the forming of lucid and winsome expression across the barrier of culture and language, how will the mystery of Christ be understood with conviction?

All this is further complicated by Paul's present state as a prisoner in chains. The bonds which held him fast were only an earthly entanglement, but physical realities do indeed affect one's clarity of presentation. Earlier in the letter Paul expressed it this way:

We proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am

struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. (Col. 1:28-2:1)

Even with the awareness that all of Christ's energy is at work powerfully within him, his task is still a struggle. It is hard, exhausting work, full of discouragements at every turn. Paul sees this work as being done on behalf of the Colossians. He is there because they have claimed him as their representative. They have entered a missional covenant with him. Somehow, in the hidden connectedness of human prayer with divine action, it is essential that they know about his struggles. From this place of empathy their prayers will effect change in the lives of those who hear Paul.

The tasks that filled my last seven weeks in the Philippines seem ordinary. They included preparing Excel files for the IHS fiscal audit, chiseling concrete to connect PVC pipe to a shower, escorting college students to their first-ever dentist appointments, reviewing the learning objectives of a Bible study curriculum on Proverbs, and more English and math lessons than I can count. What transformed the ordinary into the eternally significant was that at every step one or more young Abaknons were walking beside me, watching when Christ was powerful in me and when I struggled. Never far from my thoughts was that needful wisdom to present them mature in Christ.

And yet for all the joy I have from these lives growing in Christ-likeness, I must also say that hardly a day passed without discouragements, opposition and an awareness of my inadequacy. Mornings almost always begin for me with a pre-dawn hour of prayer and journal writing. Rare was the day that I was not begging Jesus for mercy and the strength to just keep going one more day.

Suzanne and I are convinced that whenever anything of value has come from our missionary service, the godly, true and lasting results, have come through your prayers. Paul was transparent before his partners in mission. It was hard work. It came close to breaking him, as it has us.

In the verses immediately before the ones I just read he wrote:

I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col. 1:24-27)

There is no way to present the Word of God in its fullness, to make known among an unreached people the glorious riches of Christ alive in us, without experiencing intense personal pain. Your missionaries will become mission casualties without some of you being as deeply committed to prayer as they are to remain under Jesus' lordship.

Again from Romans Chapter 15:

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there... (Rom 15:30-31)

May I say that this has always been God's main task for the sending church? It is not as satisfying as raising funds to build a visible structure or to hold an evangelistic event, nor as glamorous as going on a two-week mission trip to an exotic locale. Often prayer is offered into an apparent vacuum, a silence from which the one praying will

never, in this life, know what their labor has accomplished. But the longer I do battle against the principalities of evil, the more I realize that this is the essential core of the missional covenant: intentional, regular, and informed prayer for the missionaries' relationships with Jesus and for those they are discipling.

And may I add that this intentionality is two-sided? It is not only the missionary who is to communicate matters needing prayer. You would be surprised to know how very few of the 500-600 people getting our Prayer Updates actually reply with an email. When someone does I almost always reply sharing more detail. I am strengthened beyond what you can imagine when someone shares what they have heard as they prayed. The counsel coming from devoted prayer has often changed our direction and brought us to people who then came to faith. Doors open. Christ's Lordship is accepted, because someone took time to pray, and then to share what they sense God was saying to them.

Sending and Providing

Paul's letters also give us insight into the *fourth* and *fifth* aspects of the missional covenant. He writes to Philippi:

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. (Phil. 4:10)

...as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need (Phil. 4:15-16).

Personally I am more uncomfortable with this part of missionary service than any other. It is extremely de-energizing when I realize that I must again engage in the task of raising funds. I am by nature drawn to Hudson Taylor's approach, speaking my needs only to God, and waiting in faith for you to hear his voice. And God does speak to his people apart from the missionary asking. Still, I know that this sharing in financial and material needs is intended by God to be a deep source of joy to the giver, so I assume it is something he wants us to engage. This is an opportunity for some of you to be advocates for your missionaries. Do not wait until their needs are so severe that you hear they are being sent home. Ask them what is needed. Speak to those you know. Help make the connection. God has specifically gifted some of you with the ability to make money so that you can fund his work. Combined with the prayerful discernment, doors will open that would otherwise remain shut.

To Rome Paul shares his hope that:

...since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings (Rom. 15:23-27).

In recent years there has been a movement among Evangelical churches to only support missionaries who are citizens of the foreign nation or members of the people to be reached. The shift is necessary and good, but not to the exclusion of supporting those who can train

across cultures. The gospel is most clearly seen at the intersection of worldviews; the essentials are clarified, and faithful yet effective adaptation is made. Before you refuse support for those willing to go out from among you, ask what their vision is. Two-thirds of the funding we receive goes to supporting eight Filipinos working full-time for the gospel and six college students preparing to serve Jesus however he will lead them. Both foreigner and national are still needed.

In these passages Paul not only speaks to sending financial and other material support, but also to providing what is needed when God allows the missionary periods of rest, both as he returned “home” to Antioch and as he found rest among mature churches abroad. In our modern context this means housing, transportation and contexts in which the missionaries can be spiritually nourished while they visit the sending church. It may also mean sending your missionaries off on a quiet retreat, as you have done for us, or just allowing them to chill in your guest room for a few weeks, with simple food and conversation as needed. Paul wrote to Rome:

...so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed (Rom. 15:32)

Here’s a wild idea! Suzanne would love to visit Capul after nearly three years away. I have enough miles to get her there, but she needs to know that someone is with her parents, fixing meals for them and reminding them of things so soon forgotten. Would any of you come to Charlotte for two weeks this fall so she could go to Manila? I’m quite serious. Twenty-four-seven elder care cannot be sustained without a break. It would provide a time of much refreshment.

Maintaining a willingness to send others

Sixth, there is also a need to have partners who share in the mission task for short periods of time, or in some cases, as an introduction to what becomes a life calling. Again, in recent years there has been a movement among Evangelical churches to only support short-term mission work which involves the church members themselves. In my opinion this has often been little more than a pseudo-sanctified wander-lust, a slightly more legitimate vacation than the Caribbean cruise with a Christian speaker. Forgive me if I am being too critical, but there is need for discernment of motive, and a careful look at what will be attempted, at what cost, and are there other ways to meet the need without huge travel expense. Still, I affirm that there are many times when going to live alongside a missionary and share specific skills God has given you is exactly what God wants. Often it is the best way for the short-termer to become effective in a missional covenant.

Another wild idea: Perhaps the short term need is for travel via cyberspace. Jero needs a math and Bible tutor; Nenelyn needs an English tutor. Could you travel via scanned workbook pages attached to emails and communicate via an internet phone? These young people need some help to prepare well for college. If you would tutor them I would have more time for linguistic and exegetical tasks that only I can do. I’m quite serious. Who will join me in this mission task?

Perservering

And this brings us back to our main text in Colossians 4 and the *seventh* aspect of the missional covenant: mission begins on your block. It is first *nurtured* in your own home:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (v. 5)

John graciously allowed me to preach from his assigned section in Colossians this morning. There is undoubtedly much which still needs to be said, which I hope he will speak to when he continues next week. For my part it seems that Paul moves seamlessly from what he is doing on their behalf to what he knows they must do among those who live next door, yet are outside the church. They will need to act with wisdom among their neighbors, to be gracious in conversation, to have a reasonable answer to the outsider’s questions about their hope of glory, that is, about Jesus alive in them, and to do all this in such a way so that evil is confronted, held back, as decay is with salt, and so that their faith, which is hard for the unbeliever to swallow is, as it were, made tasty through the goodness and wholeness of their Christians’ lives—you see, all of this which is needful next door is precisely what is needed in Paul’s life as well.

There is a mystery at work here. Again and again as I have talked with those willing to take on the task of bringing Christ to the unreached people abroad, I discover that they began and were mentored by a body seriously and intentionally involved in bringing Jesus to those very near to home. Mission begins just outside these walls. What you build here will result in Christ’s church being built among every people on earth. Strengthen what is weak among you and keep on doing what God has lead you to do for many years.

May God bless you for making covenant with us and with the Abaknon.