



Catalog No. 1762

Colossians 4:7-18

28th Message

John Hanneman

August 26, 2012

SPIRITUAL COMPANIONS AND FAITHFUL SERVANTS

SERIES: THE CHRIST FORMED CHURCH:

LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #12

We come this morning to our last study in Colossians. I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, I am glad to be finished and take a bit of a break. But I am also sad because this text has offered deep nourishment to my soul this past year. When you live in a text week in and week out it is like a friend who is with you throughout the day, always on your mind. In many ways I could turn right around and start all over again.

In many of his books and poems Wendell Berry writes about farm life in the mythical town of Port William, Kentucky, and through his characters he visualizes for the reader the essence of community. In his book, *Hannah Coulter*, Berry gives this farming community the name "The Membership." What characterizes the membership is the commitment to live together and help each other with whatever needs doing through the seasons of farming and life. Hannah Coulter reflects on this:

This membership had an economic purpose and it had an economic result, but the purpose and the result were a lot more than economic. Joe Banion grew a crop on Mr. Feltner, but also drew a daily wage. The Catlett boys too were working for wages, since they had no crop. The others of us received no pay. The work was freely given in exchange for work freely given. There was no bookkeeping, no accounting, no settling up. What you owed was considered paid when you had done what needed doing. Every account was paid in full by the understanding that when we were needed we would go, and when we had need the others, or enough of them, would come. In the long, anxious work of the tobacco harvest none of us considered that we were finished until everybody was finished. In his old age Burley liked to count up the number of farms he had worked on in his life "and never took a cent of money."¹

In the Port William membership everyone was interconnected and one did not live for self, but rather for the community. This is how the church is designed to function. We could also call the church "The Membership" because we are members of one another, members of the organic and living body of Christ. We all are connected to one another and thus we pray for one another, love one another, bear one another's burdens, and forgive each other. In this membership there are not just a few superstars but rather each person contributes to the whole. We live together as spiritual companions and we both give and receive faithful service in the name of Jesus for the kingdom of God. We are not finished until we are all finished. As Paul closes his letter to the Colossians, we get a glimpse of this kind of membership in those who were companions and servants with the apostle.

Paul now turns from being a theologian to being a pastor. He deals with personal matters and his focus is on people, both those with him in Rome and those in the Lycus Valley. Some of the people mentioned are familiar names; others are not. We meet Paul's messengers, his companions in Rome, and those in Colossae who

receive a personal word from Paul before Paul personally ends his letter.

Paul's Messengers (7-9)

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. (Colossians 4:7-9)

Tychicus and Onesimus were the mailmen who would deliver this letter to the Colossians. We see Tychicus' name in several places in the New Testament. He was a native of the province of Asia (Acts 20:4) and helped bring gifts from Gentile churches to Jerusalem. He was one of Paul's primary messengers (2 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 3:12) and might have been Paul's main envoy for the Asian province. Since the passage here is almost identical to end of Ephesians (Eph. 6:21-22), Tychicus probably took both letters.

The Colossians were most likely concerned about Paul, and thus through Tychicus and Onesimus the Colossians could learn about Paul's circumstances. A variant reading in verse 8 may well mean that Paul could learn how the church in Colossae was doing. Paul's goal was to encourage or strengthen this young church, and probably for Tychicus to reinforce Paul's teaching.

I love the three phrases Paul uses to describe Tychicus. First, he is a beloved brother, Paul's favorite term to speak of the special relationship between Christians as being a part of The Membership. Second, he is a faithful or reliable minister or servant. God always works through servants. Third, he is a fellow servant, literally, "slave in the Lord." Like Paul, Tychicus is a slave of Christ meaning that he does not belong to himself, but to the Lord.

Tychicus was not an apostle like Paul, or a spiritual rock star. But he was a man formed in Christ and was an essential part of Paul's team to the early church. His character and commitment to Christ were the marks of his maturity. Paul's ministry could never be sustained without people like Tychicus.

We know about Onesimus from Paul's letter to Philemon. He had been a member of Philemon's household, a slave, and thus Paul refers to him as "one of you." Evidentially, Onesimus had wronged Philemon and left. However, through Paul's ministry Onesimus had become a believer. In a private letter to Philemon, Paul challenges Philemon to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back as a brother. Going back to Colossae with Tychicus would provide moral support for Onesimus and convince the Colossians to welcome him with open arms.

Notice again the description that Paul gives to this man – a faithful and beloved brother, similar to his description of Tychicus.

He doesn't refer to Onesimus as a flawed brother or a brother on probation. He doesn't give a warning to the Colossians to be on their guard. Rather Paul is affirming and optimistic. His desire was for the Colossians to welcome Onesimus back home warmly, in the same way that they would receive any fellow Christian.

Onesimus is an example of redemption. The Membership consists of people who were broken and wounded, lost and alone, weak and flawed. We don't have to have it all together to be part of the Membership. In Christ each one becomes a beloved brother or beloved sister through the forgiveness and restoration available to us through the cross of Christ. When we look at people in the church we don't put people on different spiritual levels, we see people in Christ. Certainly we use discernment as to positions and responsibilities within leadership. But in terms of how we view each other in Christ, we are affirming and encouraging so that barriers and divisions don't grow and impede the progress of the gospel. Tychicus and Onesimus most likely had different stories and backgrounds but they had the same standing in Christ.

Faithful Servants. Tychicus is a faithful servant. Paul describes Epaphras in the same way in chapter 1. God calls all of us to be faithful servants. The reason is that we are now devoted to God and our lives belong to Christ. We follow Jesus by loving God and loving others. Being a servant is more of a mindset or an attitude that we carry with us throughout our days rather than a task we strive to complete. We simply do what is before us faithfully, most of the time without notice or fanfare. There are no qualifications needed for being a servant, no degree, no theological training; just a willing heart that sees the needs of others with kindness and compassion. The amazing thing is that being a servant isn't work, it is life giving.

I remember as a young man in my twenties working as an engineer being obsessed with trying to figure out my career and my life. All I could focus on was myself. But then I got involved in college ministry and began serving other people. I can recall how one day while driving to work I sensed a change within me. I no longer was thinking about my life and my career but thinking about other people. The key to being a servant is to become other-centered. As for trying to figure out my life, I am still working on it.

If you want to have a legacy, a goal to ascribe to, or make an impact for the Lord, become a Tychicus; just be a faithful servant, a slave of Christ. In fact, when I look out here this morning I see many men and women that I could refer to in the same way as Paul referred to Tychicus. This is the foundation of a healthy community. This is what I love about our church. The Membership consists not of just one super leader, but many, many servants. This idea will be reinforced as we go along.

Paul's Companions (10-14)

Next we get a list of Paul's companions who wish to send their greetings to Colossae:

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me.

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I

vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. (Colossians 4:10-14)

This is a much longer list than we usually get at the end of Paul's letters. Six men are mentioned. The first three men mentioned are Jewish Christians – Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus. We don't know anything about Jesus, who was also called Justus, a common Latin cognomen. But we know a lot about Aristarchus and Mark.

Aristarchus was a native of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9) and was with Paul during the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:29). He was also with Paul on his last voyage to Judea (Acts 20:4) and set sail with Paul from Caesarea for Italy (Acts 27:2). Aristarchus is a fellow-prisoner, literally "my fellow-prisoner-of-war." This might have been actual imprisonment either by force or by choice. Or perhaps the phrase is intended to be metaphorical and would imply that Paul and Aristarchus were soldiers of Jesus. Paul was very fond of using military metaphors (Rom. 7:23; 2 Cor. 10:5).

Most of us are familiar with Mark. Mark was Peter's companion (1 Pet. 5:13) and wrote the second gospel account based on Peter's preaching. We are told here that he is Barnabas' cousin and we know from Acts that he is a relative of important leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12).

We might recall that Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas at Perga 12-14 years earlier (Acts 13:13; 15:36-40). Later this caused a split between Paul and Barnabas. Now he has redeemed himself and relationships have been healed. The Colossians had already received some instructions, either from Paul or Peter or Barnabas, about Mark. They were to welcome him and be hospitable to him as they would any guest. Like Onesimus, Mark is another example of forgiveness and restoration.

These three men, Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus, were ones from the circumcision. This could mean that they were Jewish Christians generally or, as the phrase refers to elsewhere (Acts 10:45; 11:2; Rom. 4:12; Gal. 2:12; Titus 1:10), they were devoted to a Jewish mission to the diaspora. Therefore, these three may have been Jewish preachers who worked with Paul, either directly or indirectly, evangelizing Jews without pushing submission to Torah identity markers. This is likely since Paul calls them fellow workers for the kingdom of God.

What is interesting here is that Paul says the three have been a comfort to him. The word "comfort" is a medical term meaning to alleviate or bring relief. So in some way these men lessened Paul's suffering while in chains. It might be easy to imagine how hard it would have been for Paul to be alone and how much comfort Paul would have received not only from having companions but knowing that the kingdom of God was continuing to advance while he was in chains.

We already met Epaphras in chapter 1. He was from Colossae and helped to begin all three churches in the Lycus Valley at Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Like Paul and Tychicus he is a servant or literally a slave of Christ. Even though Epaphras is absent from the Lycus Valley he is hard at work for the believers there through prayer. Paul is a witness to the effort that Epaphras extends.

What is interesting is that Paul uses two words describing Epaphras that he used earlier to describe his own ministry. First, like Paul, Epaphras labors intensely, wrestles, picking up the athletic metaphor that Paul used in 1:29 and 2:1. Epaphras agonizes in prayer. Jesus also agonized in prayer on the eve of his crucifixion.

Second, his goal is that believers in the Lycus Valley might stand complete and fully assured of God's will. This was Paul's stated goal in 1:28: to present everyone complete or mature in Christ. To have full assurance of God's will might mean to convince fully, or it could mean to be filled, i.e. with the fullness of Christ in whom all the fullness of deity dwells. As believers we are growing into the fullness of Christ, careful to not be derailed by false spiritualities like the heresy in Colossae that promoted a bogus perfection.

We might note that Epaphras prayed "always," not just some times, and desired "all" the will of God, not just parts. The bottom line is that Epaphras had the same passion as Paul for the church.

Of course we are familiar with Luke, the beloved physician, the doctor of the soul and author of the third gospel and book of Acts.

Finally we know Demas. Paul writes in 2 Tim. (4:10-11) that Demas left Paul and went to Thessalonica out of the love for the present world. Now it appears that Demas has come home and, like Onesimus and Mark, is another example of forgiveness and restoration.

Once again we see that Paul was surrounded by a great group of spiritual companions and valued friends who served with him and supported him.

Spiritual Companions. We all have a deep desire for friends. God created us for relationships. We long for someone to be a companion, a buddy; someone who knows us and accepts us anyway; someone we could call any time night or day. But more importantly, what we need are spiritual friends; companions that walk with us, pray for us, encourage us, comfort us, and challenge us; friends to share our lives with in complete freedom. Even the great apostle needed companions.

Theologians call the Christian life a pilgrimage. We begin a journey to a distant land. We are headed somewhere, to a great banquet table with the Lord. But the journey isn't easy. We face obstacles, struggles, and at times, despair. There are changes, transitions, places to go, things to learn. And so it is important to have companions and to be a companion to others. We both give aid to others and are willing to receive aid. We help each other discern the path that leads to life. None of us are intended to travel the road alone.

I know this isn't easy. If you are like me relationships come hard. I was deeply introverted growing up and didn't have many friends. Most of us have fears of being vulnerable and trusting others, especially if we have been hurt in the past. We close our hearts and sing with Simon and Garfunkel, "I am a rock, I am an island. A rock feels no pain, and an island never cries." But it isn't possible not to cry. We all cry, even if it is inwardly where no one sees. John Donne is correct when he writes "no man is an island, entire of itself."

The truth is that all of us are afraid; we all fear the same thing: that if people really knew us they wouldn't like us. All of us have things that we do not want others to know or see. Friendships allow us to become real. They speak of the deep desire we have to be in a friendship with God. If we keep people at a distance we probably do the same with God. But God wants to be our accepting and caring friend as well.

I know I have been blessed to have some spiritual companions that know all of my weaknesses and accept me as I am. They have walked with me through struggles, encouraged me in the faith, and co-labored with me in ministry. I would be nowhere without

their love and faithfulness. Friends are God's gift to us and thus are encouraged to keep our hearts open.

Paul's Messages (15-17)

Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord." (Colossians 4:15-17)

Paul has three messages to convey. First he wants to send his greetings to the church at Laodicea. Laodicea was about ten miles to the northwest of Colossae. And specifically Paul wants to send greetings to Nympha who hosts a house church, most likely in Laodicea. Nympha is probably a feminine name and so we see the significance of women that we see elsewhere in the New Testament. House churches were common in the early church and sometimes the church was small enough so that all could meet in one house (Acts 12:12; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5; Acts 16:15, 40; Rom. 16:23; Rom. 16:1-2).

Second, Paul apparently sends two letters, one to Colossae and another to Laodicea. He wants the letters to be read to the congregation and then to be exchanged. Laodicea was probably exposed to the same false teaching as Colossae but maybe there were some differences, since Paul sent two letters. Most likely the letter to Laodicea was lost, maybe in an earthquake in the Lycus Valley of A.D. 60-61. The word "read" is a word used for reading the Old Testament Scriptures, and thus Paul implies that his letters carry the same weight.

Finally, Paul has a word for a man by the name of Archippus: See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord. We know from Philemon that Archippus was a member of Philemon's household, perhaps his son. The ministry he was given maybe concerned Onesimus or perhaps he had a ministry of preaching in Colossae.

We see here how personally Paul cared for the church at Colossae even though he had never visited the city. He prayed always for this church and wanted to be an encouragement to the believers there.

Paul's Blessing (18)

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. (Colossians 4:18)

Finally, as Paul usually does, he takes the pen and appends his own signature, conveying apostolic authority and brotherly affection (1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Thess. 3:17; Gal. 6:11). He asks that the Colossians remember his chains, implying a request for continued prayer as they remember his situation, a common request at the end of Paul's letters (Rom 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-20; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1-3; Philem. 22). The letter ends with a final benediction, "grace be with you," providing an inclusio to 1:2 and summing up the whole idea of Colossians which is appropriating more fully the grace of God in Christ. "God's grace will sustain the community, for it is by grace alone that they will stand."²

Let me leave you with four themes to take away from this morning.

Faithful Servants. How might God be calling you to serve him and others? If you know the answer, then just be faithful to follow through. Perhaps Paul's word to Archippus is for you – complete

the ministry you received from the Lord. If you don't know where to start, my encouragement is to simply be prayerful, open, and attentive to the needs around you, right where you are. Finding ways of serving and discovering your spiritual gifts flow naturally by discerning and responding to our God-given desires.

Spiritual Companions. Who is in your life? Who is a companion on your spiritual journey? To whom might you be a companion? If you don't know where to start check out the new mentoring page on our website.

Real People. Our spiritual life and journey is not just about theological ideas but also about real people – Luke, Mark, Demas, Onesimus, Nympha. We are not a name on a wall or an entry in a register. The church is not about numbers or buildings or accomplishments. Many of us have been stifled and suppressed by organized religion and we forget that the church is people - real people with real stories with real longings and real problems. Our stories are important. They connect us to The Story, the story of Jesus and his work of salvation. Our story connects us to two thousand years of stories, the stories of believers through the generations. Our stories are not the story of doing everything perfectly. They are the stories of grace, God's grace in the midst of our failures, God's forgiveness in the midst of our sin, God's rescue from our darkness. These stories connect us to each other and involve us in The Membership as the body of Christ.

Ministry of the Saints. Paul was not a one-man show. He was surrounded by people who labored with him. Over the years I have heard many stories about churches built around the charisma and leadership of one dynamic person. As long as this one person was there, the church would grow and thrive. But when the one person left for another position or for retirement, the church declined both in size and energy. This is not how God intended the church to function. This is not what we see in the New Testament.

What brings life and vitality to a church? God can use a strong gifted leader, but what really creates life is when each person is engaged, planted, and giving themselves to the life of the community and enthused at how God is working in people's lives. The church consists of its many members and each member is essential to the working of the whole. Team ministry and relational ministry are the key components.

Here at PBCC we do not have a senior pastor. This is not always efficient, but it is healthy. We do not just have one main preacher but several. At times this is confusing, but it is important to hear many voices not just one. As pastors we work to train and equip others so that we all can use our spiritual gifts and can do the work of ministry. We are a community of real people who by God's grace become faithful servants and spiritual companions. We are not finished until we are all finished.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

1. Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 93-94, emphasis added.

2. Peter O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 260.

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