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Colossians 1:1–8

2nd Message

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GOSPEL-FORMED COMMUNITY

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

Today marks the tenth anniversary of 9/11, a day that has become unforgettable for all Americans. While the events of that day were horrific beyond our imagination, much of what is remembered and retold are the stories of men and women who were lifted by tragic events to inspiring acts of heroism and salvation. Men and women were propelled to a different level of living. Life was no longer about getting ahead and caring for personal interests. People became more important than tasks and possessions. People thought about God, eternal life, and saving others at the cost of their own lives.

This is exactly what the gospel does. Those who respond to the truth of the gospel message are propelled into a different sphere of living. Believers in Jesus are transported into the already-inaugurated kingdom of God. The communities that form around those who are following Jesus are called churches, and become, to use Eugene Peterson's phrase, colonies "of heaven in the country of death."¹ Tragedy still happens all around us, but life takes on a different purpose and meaning. That is what happened 2000 years ago in Colossae, a city on the Meander River in Asia Minor in the first century AD, and what has continued to happen in cities all over the world ever since. Communities have been forming, shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our study in the book of Colossians began last week. We talked about Paul's main goal for every believer in Jesus, which is to become complete or mature in Christ – for Christ to be fully formed in the heart. Spiritual formation is the context by which we can read and understand what Paul says in his letter to the Colossian church, and as we listen carefully and apply Paul's teaching, it will shape our character further into Christ-likeness. Today we go back to the beginning of the book. Our text is the first eight verses, starting with Paul's greeting.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. (Colossians 1:1-2, TNIV)

In typical fashion Paul mentions the author and the recipients, and expresses a greeting in the letter's introduction. All of Paul's letters are introduced slightly differently; he's always a little bit creative. Paul is writing from prison, but he is not alone. Timothy, his beloved son in the faith, is with him, as well as several others who are mentioned in chapter 4. Right from the start, Paul claims his authority as an apostle. He belongs to Jesus Christ and has been commissioned by God. Even though Paul did not visit Colossae, nor was he rejected there as he was in Corinth and Galatia, nevertheless he mentions the fact that he is an apostle so that the Colossians will listen closely to what he has to say. What he says in this letter has apostolic weight and the Colossians need to receive his word. Paul is their apostle, despite the fact he has never been there in person.

The brothers and sisters in Colossae are God's holy people, they are saints – and that's what we are! This was a term used to describe

God's people, Israel in the Old Testament and followers of Jesus in the New Testament. They are the faithful, the people who have put their trust in Jesus. These believers are both in Colossae and in Christ, a colony of heaven in the country of death. Paul's desire is for the Colossians to appreciate and appropriate fully God's grace in Jesus Christ and to experience the peace, or *shalom*, they now have in relationship to God.

Signs of Authentic Community

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” (Colossians 1:3–8)

There are two things I want to talk about from these verses – the signs of an authentic community in Colossae, and Paul's gratitude for what he hears. A third matter we encounter in our text, the idea of the whole gospel for the whole world, we will take up next week.

The church at Colossae was birthed through the evangelistic efforts of Epaphras. The name Epaphras is short for Epaphroditus, but this man is not to be confused with the Epaphroditus we encounter in Philippians. Paul describes Epaphras as a beloved fellow slave and a faithful servant of Christ. The term "servant of God" is a title of honor in the Old Testament. Abraham (Ps. 105.42), Moses (Ps. 105.26; 2 Kings 18.12), David (2 Sam. 7.5; Ps. 89.4, 21), and the prophets (Amos 3.7) are all called "servants of God." In other words, Paul has a very high regard for Epaphras, his disciple.

Epaphras was Paul's representative to the Lycus Valley, so while Paul was at Ephesus preaching the gospel, he sent Epaphras to the Lycus Valley to preach the gospel there. This gospel is described as the "true word" of the gospel or "word of truth." Gospel and word of truth are in apposition to each other. The Colossians heard this truth (repeated twice) and they came to know the grace of God in truth. The fact that they learned the truth means that they became disciples and that Epaphras had given them systematic instruction. Paul reminds the Colossians of the truth of the gospel because it stands in contrast to the false, deceptive teachings the Colossians were beginning to encounter, the things Paul will address in chapter 2.

The gospel bore the fruit of spiritual character in Colossae and caused the growth of a new community of believers, just as it was doing in the entire world. Many commentators understand "fruit-bearing" to "be a crop of good deeds (Phil. 1.1)," while "growing" "points to the increasing number of converts."² Just as God first

blessed Adam and Eve and then Noah, and told them to be fruitful and multiply, so he intended the gospel – through the work of his servants – to have the same result, ever since God called Abraham to be a blessing to the nations.

The impact of the gospel in Colossae, the fruit that developed, was a community known for faith, love, and hope, a familiar triad that we encounter in many places in the New Testament (1 Cor. 13.13; Rom. 5.1-5; Gal. 5.5-6; 1 Thess. 1.3, 5.8). The gospel had propelled some people in Colossae to live on a wholly different level. They had placed their hope in Jesus, resulting in lives lived out in faith and love. Let me say a word about these three Christian virtues.

Hope. As a result of hearing the gospel the Colossians had placed their hope in Jesus, who is the hope of glory (1.27). This hope is based on what is unseen in the future – eternal life, resurrection, sharing the glory of God, receiving an incorruptible body, finding a permanent home that does not decay. This hope is stored in heaven where no power can touch it. Hope in the events and outcomes of this world is uncertain. Why would we place our hope in things that are temporary and unpredictable? No matter how hard we try we can't always control terrorism, or the economy, or the spread of cancer. Hope in heaven is a sure and certain hope and it produces faith and love. Any teaching that detracts from this future hope is bogus. Any philosophy that would tell you to get as much as you can from this world – because there is nothing else after it – is a lie and a deception. We encounter these philosophies in the world all the time, and if we are honest we realize this is even the way we think sometimes. This is why, when a believer passes away, we do not grieve like those who have no hope. We grieve, of course, but we know the glory into which they have entered. And this is why the events of 9/11 caused so many Americans to think deeply about where their hope is, and led many people to God to find a hope that no terrorist attack could take away.

Faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus is not so much the object of faith but the environment or sphere in which faith lives and acts. These Colossian believers were in Adam but now they have been incorporated into Jesus. Paul referred to the Colossians as faithful brothers in Christ in verse 2. These brothers and sisters are living out their faith. They are living “believing” lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ. They are not saying one thing and doing something else. Hope in eternal things produces faithful living.

Love for all the saints. Hope in eternal things also produces love. Paul says in Galatians, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6).” Love is “the practical expression of care and concern”³ that takes place in a community. Paul refers again to this love in verse 8 – “love in the Spirit.” Being “in Christ” means to be “in the Spirit.” We love in the Spirit, not in the flesh. (This is the only place where the Spirit is mentioned in Colossians).

The Colossians exhibit a practical, down-to-earth, hands on love. And it isn't expressed just towards some, but rather it is inclusive towards all: the lovely and the unlovely, the rich and the poor, the extroverts and the wallflowers. Love is the sure sign of Christian maturity. Paul writes to Timothy, “The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Later in chapter 3, Paul urges the Colossians: “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:14).

Hope, faith and love are the fruits, or signs, of a gospel-formed, Christ-formed, authentic Christian community. This is what marked the church at Colossae and hopefully this is the spiritual fruit that people see when they attend our church. Church is not a consumer product advertised to fulfill or satisfy our earthly desires and appetites. Church is a community of people who are placing their hope in heaven, and in the meantime manifesting the fruit of a living faith and an active love. Thus in chapter 3 Paul will exhort: “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2).

We heard earlier in the service about all sorts of ministries happening here at PBCC – missionaries taking the gospel all over the world, men and women here in Cupertino bringing the gospel to our elementary-aged children through Sunday School, and our upcoming men's retreat where we spend the weekend focusing intently on our spiritual formation in Christ. These are not just programs, activities to keep us all busy and make everyone think that we have a good church. To the contrary, all of these activities have to do with community, and all of them present us with opportunities to keep centered on our heavenly hope, grow in faith, and love others. Hopefully, we reflect at our church what Paul heard about Colossae.

Expressions of Gratitude

The second thing I want to mention is Paul's response to hearing about the hope, faith and love happening in Colossae, which Epaphras describes when he comes to visit Paul in prison in Rome.

Paul prays for the church in Colossae frequently and consistently, probably daily. This is amazing when you think about the fact that the city of Colossae was no great shakes, a city long past its prime and prominence. And yet when Epaphras shares with Paul all that is taking place in Colossae, Paul breaks out into thanksgiving to God, saying “we give thanks for you always when we pray for you” – even though he is bound by chains. Paul is grateful and thankful for what he hears because this is his passion – to raise up mature believers living together in Spirit-formed, gospel-formed communities.

Paul is a great model for being thankful in all things no matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves. He expresses thanksgiving for every community he writes to (except for Galatians), and we would do well to follow his example.

This last year Sandra McCracken was here with Matthew Smith. On one of her albums she sings a song entitled *Petition*. Here is a sampling of the lyrics:

Father whate'er of earthly bliss
Thy sovereign hand denies
Accepted at Thy throne of grace
Let this petition rise

Let the sweet hope that thou art mine
My life and death attend
Thy presence through my journey shine
And crown my journey's end

Give me a calm, a thankful heart
From every murmur free
The blessings of Thy grace impart
And make me live to Thee

Most of the lyrics to this hymn were originally penned by Anne Steele in 1738, after her fiancé drowned the day before their wedding.

McCracken writes, “Gratitude is a shield against fear and self-absorption. It makes the heart quiet and poised to listen.”⁴ Gratitude, even in the midst of grief, is another sign of being formed in Christ.

The opposite of gratitude is resentment. Resentment is cold, repressed anger. Henri Nouwen writes,

Resentment is the curse of the faithful, the virtuous, the obedient, and the hardworking... Resentment is the complaint that life does not unfold the way we planned ... It replaces faith, hope, and charity with fear, doubt, and rivalry...

It is very easy for us to be controlled and absorbed with resentment rather than gratitude.

Nouwen continues,

Resentment blocks action; gratitude lets us move forward toward new possibilities. Resentment makes us cling to negative feelings; gratitude allows us to let go. Resentment makes us prisoners of our passions. Gratitude helps us to transcend our compulsions to follow our vocation. Resentment exhausts us by complicated jealousies and ambiguities, stirring up destructive desires for revenge. Gratitude takes our fatigue away and gives us new vitality and enthusiasm. Resentment entangles us in endless distractions, pulling us down to banal preoccupations. Gratitude anchors our deepest self beyond this world and allows us to be involved without losing ourselves.

As long as we remain resentful about things that we wish had not happened, about relationships that we wish had turned out differently, about mistakes we wish we had not made, part of our heart remains isolated, unable to bear fruit in the new life ahead of us.

Spiritual formation is the way by which resentment can slowly be transformed into gratitude.⁵

How do we cultivate a grateful heart? Well, like hope, if our gratitude is based on the “blessings” and circumstances of this life we walk a slippery slope, grateful one day when things go the way we want them to, and complaining the next when life disappoints. Gratitude comes from looking at eternal things with spiritual eyes, like Paul who, although he was chained down in prison, was overflowing with thanksgiving to God when he heard the news from Colossae. Gratitude comes from knowing that God is present and working, from seeing faith and love worked out in our lives and in our community. The root word in Greek for being thankful is the word *charis*, which means “gift” or “grace.” Gratitude comes from accepting life as a gift and believing that everything is grace.

Adele Calhoun writes: “We ... have choices about how to respond to what life dishes up. We each have the power to interpret the facts of our lives. We make the choices that turn us into bitter or grateful people. Gratitude is rooted in the reality that ‘bidden or unbidden, God is present.’”⁶

Give me a calm, a thankful heart
From every murmur free
The blessings of Thy grace impart
And make me live to Thee

Gospel-formed community produces people filled with faith, hope, love and gratitude, which come through the Holy Spirit and are possible only because we are redeemed, restored, and forgiven saints.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, (New York: Harper One, 2011), 110.
2. Peter O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 11.
3. O’Brien, *Colossians*, 13.
4. Sandra McCracken, “New Old Hymns,” n.p. [cited 10 September 2011]. Online: <http://www.newoldhymns.com/in-feast-or-fallow>.
5. Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, (New York: Harper One, 2010), 59-65.
6. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 30.

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