

Sunday, July 3, 2016

Christ Supreme in a World that has Burrito Supreme

Colossians 1: 15-23; Mark 4: 35-41

Living Faith: Section 3.2.1

Hymns: #328 This is my Father's World; #240 Rock of Ages, Clef for Me; #479 the church's one foundation

As you know, the Rev. Herb Hilder is away on vacation for some much needed R + R, Rest and Relaxation. When preparing for July, Herb and I sat down for a coffee to chat and discuss pulpit supply and when we talked, Herb shared with me that through last winter after breaking his wrist, Katherine being diagnosed and going through chemotherapy treatment and even his daughter being in a couple of car accidents, the Hilders really have had a pretty difficult year. And so I would encourage all of us to not only pray for the Hilders, but upon their return, really heap love and support on them. The life of a Pastor and their family is not an easy one. And I know having served in two previous churches in both Vancouver and Coquitlam, nothing energizes me more than knowing how much the congregation loved and supported us.

The Pastor's heart is one that is always focused on his or her congregation. From Session meetings to visiting congregation members, it seems that the Pastor's work never ends. And when we read the book of Colossians, we find the perfect example of what the Pastor's heart ought to look like.

In the book of Colossians, we find one of the shortest letters that Paul writes to the new churches. Yet, when we read this particular letter, it is no less important. The Apostle Paul loves the new church as how a parent loves their children. Parental Love is much more than just a feeling. It involves patience and goodness and it hopes for the best. Parental Love doesn't always look calm. On the one hand, you want to love your children allowing them to explore the world around them. But on the other hand, as a parent, you want your children to be safe and when you see them start to get into trouble, you have a responsibility to keep them safe.

As new parents, Alli and I walk that fine line every day. Because Alyx is still young, we want her to explore the world around her. We want her to crawl and play and learn. At home we have a soft mat where she plays with her toys. She is very tactile, wanting to feel and scratch the things around her. But Alyx also has a very big interest in strings, long hair and wires. I find myself allowing Alyx to pull the drawstrings of my hoodie for example. But when Alyx starts to pull on Alli's hair, or when she lunges for the cell phone that is charging on the side table, we have to stop her. We say, "Momma's hair isn't for pulling!" Or we'll say, "the charging cable isn't a toy!" We want her to explore but we also want to keep her safe!

In the same way, Paul is writing the Colossian Church because he wants them to interact with the world with their new found faith. But, on the other hand, Paul sees that there are teachings that are beginning to creep into the new church that will ultimately harm them. The crux of the first chapter of Colossians and ultimately what we will focus on this morning is the teaching that Paul has for the early church. And this teaching is that Christ is ultimately supreme in this world.

Now the word "Supreme" is a word that we as modern thinkers rarely consider. We hear the word all the time though. And the best example I can think of is that we use the word "Supreme" in marketing. When I was young, my father often times would pick me up from school and take me to the local mall and we'd share a snack from McDonald's or the local vendor, or my absolute favourite, Taco Bell! Having moved to Vancouver 8 years ago, you can imagine my disappointment when I found out that in the lower mainland, there were only two Taco Bells. I digress a bit, but in looking at the marketing of Taco Bell, the only time I would encounter the word "supreme" was at Taco Bell when they described their food. **[SLIDE 1] They have the "Burrito Supreme". They have "Fries Supreme". They have "Nachos Supreme".** But in all of this the word "Supreme" is an adjective used to describe the Taco Bell menu options. When we think of the word Supreme, images of the "biggest" and the "best" come to

mind. Never mind whether or not you like or dislike Taco Bell. We as a society have trivialized the word supreme.

Paul's concern isn't about tacos or nachos or French fries. Paul's concern when he writes to the church is the Supremacy of Christ! Paul writes that Christ is SUPREME. And the church was living in an age where Christ's supremacy was being challenged by other philosophies, other religions and other gods. And the world's teaching was creeping into the understanding of the Early Church.

And so Paul writes this letter to this baby church, wanting to intervene and keep them safe.

Colossians 1: 1 – 14

When we first begin to read Colossians 1, we find that Paul spends the first 14 verses introducing himself. He writes, ***“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²To God’s holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.***

To the modern reader, this kind of introduction to a letter, whether it is a personal letter or a business letter, seems to be odd. Usually in our modern way of writing a letter, we would END the letter by signing it, “Sincerely, Allen Ye.” Or “Best regards, Allen Ye.” Normally, we end our letters by signing off on them. So this begs the question, why does Paul do this? There are two reasons for this.

1. This is the proper way to begin a letter in the ancient world. Instead of signing off on a letter, the author of the letter would “sign on” instead. The author introduces himself or herself in the beginning of the letter so the reader knows who was addressing them.
2. The second reason, and more importantly for our reading of the scripture is that we need to understand that Paul does not have a personal connection with the church in Colossae. So, for Paul to write a letter to the church would have been intrusive. The people might have had

heard who Paul was, but why was he writing this letter? Paul goes on to introduce and explain himself. As you can see, Paul includes in his opening sentence

- a. “Our brother Timothy” Timothy of course was a co-worker in the ministry, someone Paul had a direct connection with. Paul views Timothy not only as a co-worker in the church’s work, but also as a brother. Including Timothy’s name here would create a connection with the church. Paul’s desire for writing this letter was his way of showing them that he had heard about them, cared for what they did in their city and genuinely wanted them to grow in their faith. Maturing in the Christian faith was Paul’s prime concern for writing to them.

3. Epaphras

- a. In his letter to the church, Paul also includes a second name in his greeting. Here, Paul decides to name drop Epaphras. We don’t know too much about Epaphras. He is only mentioned twice in the Bible. Once in the book of Colossians and the second time in the book of Philemon. Even though we don’t know much about him, it doesn’t mean that he wasn’t important to this particular church. In fact when we read vs. 6-7 of Colossians we see why. Paul writes, ***“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.⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.”*** You see Paul includes Epaphras in his letter because Epaphras was the one that planted the church in Colossae. And because Paul knew Epaphras, he has created another connection with the church.
- b. There’s one more thing that is here that we don’t immediately see when Paul includes Epaphras though. Some scholars believe that Epaphras was converted to the faith by

Paul. And because Epaphras was converted by Paul and Epaphras was the one that planted the church in Colossae, that this connection strengthens the relationship between Paul and the church and that his letter and teachings would become more meaningful to them.

4. Context of the Colossian Church

- a. The greeting that Paul writes to the church in Colossae is much more than Paul just making connections to the church. When you boil it down to its essence, Paul is wishing to write a letter to the church that will show them his Pastor's heart. Remember, the church there is still quite young and because of that, Paul wants to make sure that they are not led astray by any false teaching. And this was a very real possibility.
- b. You see the church had already been established, but like us, we live in a world that influences and affects our worldview. In the Colossian Church, there were various factors influencing the church such as other gods and other religions. There were many different voices that were speaking into society and because of that, this would have caused confusion, or at the very least, it would have influenced the church in its thinking.
 - i. In our world, there are voices that speak into society that tells us that there is no God that there is no higher power, that everything happens by chance.
 - ii. There are other voices in our world that say that there is a higher power, but that Christ's voice and the role that the church plays is but one of many.
 - iii. Often times we are influenced by these voices and we forget that ultimately that Jesus Christ said that HE was the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father except through Him.

- c. But you see when we make the comparison from what we see in our world with the world that the Colossian Church interacted with there are many similarities that we can learn from.
- d. In the church in Colossae, we must remember that they lived in the ancient Greco world. And in that world, there were many influences. Of course, there were the many gods that were worshiped and many of which we are familiar with at the very least by name. Those gods would have included Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Neptune, and the list goes on and on.
- e. For the church, there were many influences that society had on been pressuring them on. And the one that Paul addresses in his letter to the church was something that modern scholars call the Colossian Heresy.

5. Colossian Heresy

- a. So what is the Colossian Heresy? As a leader in the Gentile Mission, Paul is concerned with the teaching, learning and understanding of the Early Church. In Colossae, the Church was being influenced by the philosophies around them. And one of the new philosophies that had a major influence in that particular city was an early form of Gnosticism.
- b. The philosophy of Gnosticism says there is a separation between the physical and the spiritual. Gnosticism also says that the physical, or matter, was inherently evil, that it was flawed and that it was sinful. The spiritual however was good. And so in the framework of Christ, who is God (the spiritual), coming to Earth as fully human (matter), this understanding in Gnosticism would have been incompatible.
- c. With this philosophy being floated around, this understanding was influencing the Church. The church was being taught that Christ was not fully human and because of

that, the gospel as it was being taught, was being altered into something that Paul knew wasn't true.

- d. The other thing about the philosophy of early Gnosticism that was being taught was that there was a secret knowledge that people had to attain before they were saved. The root word of Gnosticism is "knowledge" and because of that, the church was being influenced into trying to "know" what those secrets were before people would be allowed to be part of the church to be saved.
 - e. As Paul heard about all of these things, he felt that it was his duty to write to the church in order to clear up any of these misunderstanding.
6. That's why after all the greetings that Paul writes to the church, we find that we get into the heart of what Paul wants to write to them. In Colossians 1: 15-23, we see that Paul launches into his argument of who Christ truly is.
- a. In the first 5 verses of his argument from vs. 15-20, we see that Paul doesn't waste anytime in laying out his understanding of who Christ is. In vs. 15 Paul writes,
 - i. ***"¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."***
 - ii. Often times, we read something like this and we think that it is written quite poetically and we are tempted to gloss over or skip over these words.
 - iii. But Paul opens his argument with these words because it clearly and succinctly reminds his readers of the identity of Christ. Christ is no mere human being, a person born of physical matter. He is not merely of the spiritual. Paul writes that Christ is the image of the invisible God, that he is firstborn over all creation. But what does that mean? Ultimately it means this. That if we are looking to know who God the Father is, we must first look towards Jesus Christ. It is in

Jesus Christ as a person who walked on this Earth, his characteristics, his deeds, his love, his life, that we can see clearly who God is.

1. I've been doing a lot of reflecting between the relationship of parent and child. And often times, you might not realize it, but as children we pick up a lot of tendencies and traits from our parents. Our parents influence the way we do things. Our perspective of the world is shaped by how our parents showed the world to us. In the same way as a Father now, I am well aware of how my actions, my words and my deeds influence will affect Alyx. In the same way when Paul writes that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, what he's actually saying is that looking in a mirror, when we see Jesus, we see God the Father reflected back at him. Paul wants the church in Colossae to come and know who Jesus is so that they may become closer to the Father

iv. Paul then writes that Jesus is the first born of creation. In verse 16 and 17 he writes, ¹⁶***For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.***¹⁷***He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.***" Paul writes these words to remind the Church in Colossae that everything under Heaven and Earth was created for Christ Jesus. This reminder is important to both the church and for us, especially as we see the many influences of society around us. It is in Christ that order prevails and the world doesn't fall into chaos.

1. Looking to Christ, we can see that this is true, especially when we place these verses of creation beside Jesus' ministry here on Earth. This

morning, aside from Colossians, we also read from the book of Mark chapter 4. And in Mark chapter 4, there is an account of Jesus' power over creation. We're told that during Jesus' ministry, there was one day where Jesus was teaching. And during that day, we're told that Jesus said to his disciples, let's go to other side of the lake. And so as the disciples began to sail, Jesus fell into a deep sleep. As Jesus slept, we're told that a furious storm came about, the storm was SO BAD, that the waves broke over the boat and it was taking in a lot of water. The disciples woke up Jesus, because they needed HELP. And what did Jesus do? Jesus woke up, and he rebuked the waves! Ok, let's pause for a second. How crazy does Jesus sounds right now? You know how we had all of those thunderstorm warnings this week? Can you imagine going outside to yell at the storm clouds and the thunder? I'm sure your neighbours would call you CRAZY! But Jesus does that he rebukes the storm and the scriptures tell us that the wind dies down and it was completely calm.

2. Now the reaction of the disciples was interesting isn't it? If it were merely a story, we'd expect to see that disciples would be happy; they'd be jumping for joy because they were saved. But instead, their response was to ask themselves, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" And they were TERRIFIED.
3. The question then becomes, why are they terrified? They are terrified because the disciples are beginning to understand the POWER that Jesus has. And power in itself isn't scary.. IF you can control it. But the

disciples don't control this power. Jesus does. And he is SO powerful that he even controls the wind and the waves and by extension, he controls CREATION himself.

4. And so in Colossians then, Paul writes that all things have been created in Jesus and for Jesus. And this was the kind of person that Paul was writing about.

v. ***"¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."***

1. In verse 18, Paul's writing switches and he begins to talk about Christ as head of the body of the church reminding them that he is the beginning and that he has the supremacy. He writes that God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him he reconciled all things on EARTH and on HEAVEN.
2. Paul writes all of these things once again to clarify the Christian understanding from the Gnostic understanding of the world. The Gnostics would have had the church believe that God was separate from the Earth, that the spiritual was separate from the physical. But Paul writes these things to remind the Church that it is God that created the world. And when God created the world, he called it – good. Everything in Heaven and on Earth was created through him. And it was in Christ that God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.

There was no separation between Jesus Christ and God. Christ was both human and God. And that the world, though separated from God because of SIN, was therefore reconciled to God, how? Through the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross for each and every one of us. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel.

vi. But the imagery of creation plays another important role. And that role is to remind the church that the old has fallen away and the new has come. In Christ, he is the firstborn of all creation, meaning that there is a NEW GENESIS, a NEW BEGINNING in Christ. All the things that we see in the world that aren't right, that do not make sense, that aren't in tune with God's plan and creation, those things have fallen away because there is a new way of living – in Christ.

1. In all of this, this new Genesis, this new creation, this is important symbolism for the church to take in. The reason for this is that if the Church remembers that there is a new beginning, WE are included in all of this. In verse 21 – 23, Paul writes this:

a. ²¹Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. ²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— ²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."

2. And since we are now included we are invited into this new reality with Christ. As the Church, we are commissioned to continue Christ's work, telling and retelling the good news of the gospel to the world around us. Paul is encouraging the Church in Colossae to NOT lose their faith in this world. They have heard the good news of the gospel and so the world NEEDS to hear the good news of the gospel from THEM as well.
7. Friends, when we look at the book of Colossians, we see that Paul is writing to the church because he is concerned for the church. As a Pastor in the Early global church, Paul wants to ensure that the congregation in Colossae doesn't stray away from understanding who CHRIST is. Paul's heart is concerned for them because he wants them to STAY the course!
 - a. And in the same way then, when WE read the book of Colossians, it is also so important for us to understand who Jesus is so that we too might know how we ought to interact with the world.
 - b. Knowing who Christ is and knowing the arguments that Paul lays out with regards to the supremacy of Christ is very good. But the question for us as Christians today is WHAT do we do with that information? Because in all honesty KNOWING about something and acting upon it are two separate things. To go deeper, KNOWING about something and having it change our perspective or our world view in order that it changes us from the inside out is completely outside of our control.
 - c. So then what? This is where the role of the Holy Spirit comes into play. What I've learned over the last few years is this. We can be relentless in our pursuit in knowledge. We can listen to all the sermons in the world. We can download all the podcasts we can get our hands on. We can hear the most amazing arguments that support our beliefs in Jesus. But if we do not trust in him, if we do not give up OUR CONTROL and allow the

Holy Spirit to seep the knowledge that Christ is supreme not only in our lives but in this world, then we are no better than the person reading the newspaper in the morning, and upon finishing reading the newspaper we forget everything that we've read. It is the Holy Spirit that renews our mind and transforms us. Christ is the beginning, he is the NEW Genesis. And it is the Holy Spirit that changes us, transforms us so that our character can become more and more like Christ's everyday.

8. Friends, it is this renewing of the mind, this understanding that Christ is supreme in all of the world that Paul concerns himself with writing to the church. The final section in chapter 1, includes Paul writing these words to his audience.

a. *²⁴ Now I rejoice in what I am suffering 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. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

b. What we don't see in Paul writing to the church in Colossae is that when Paul writes these words, he is writing them while he is in prison. The amazing thing I think is we see the character of Paul in his writing of these letters. Even though he is in prison BECAUSE of the gospel, because of the mission that Jesus has placed him on, we never find a sense of self-pity on the part of Paul. Instead he writes that he REJOICES because he is

suffering for you – he is suffering for the church! It is because he is boldly going where no person has gone before and it is because he boldly going to tell people of the good news of Jesus Christ that he is running into opposition. But this is NOT out of the ordinary. Even Jesus tells his disciples that the world will hate them.

In John 15 Jesus says, ¹⁸ *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”*

Being in prison and being hated for spreading the good news of the gospel was no surprise for Paul and neither should it be for us either.

9. This isn't an easy road for any one to embark on. But at the end of the day, how the world perceives us should be a secondary concern for us. Our primary concern is to come to really understand who Christ is to the world. Then we begin to live our lives in the midst of this understanding, engaging the people around us with the love that Christ has for this world. By doing this, we then show the world the love that Christ has for them, not only telling them about Jesus, but showing this world how it can be transformed and redeemed to God, through Christ's sacrifice for us.
10. Friends, when we read the book of Colossians, we must remember two things. The first thing is Paul's pastoral heart that shines through the message as he writes to the early church. The second thing that we must remember is Paul's ultimate desire for the early church that is to mature in the Christian life. Paul does this by first explaining who Christ is and why he is supreme in all of the Earth. Later on in the letter, Paul unpacks what maturing in the Christian

life looks like, which we will explore in the coming two weeks. My hope is that we will all begin to understand the book of Colossians by studying its words so that we too may grow and mature in the Christian life together as well. Amen.