

Sermon for Zion, September 6, 2020

Hymns: 371 - Love Divine; 373 – Jesus Loves Me; 376 – Shine, Jesus Shine

Scripture: Colossians 1:1-14

Sermon Title: Love Anyway

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.

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 God's 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 message 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.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Some of you may know that I had scheduled a “Footsteps of Paul” pilgrimage for last May, where we would travel through Greece and Turkey, visiting the many places where Paul had established those very first communities of faith, and along the way, helping the Book of Acts and the Letters of Paul really come alive for us. It is amazing how visiting a place makes everything more tangible, more real.

Lots of the places we visit have ancient remains of the cities where Paul preached. Corinth, for instance; they've excavated the marketplace, including the area where visitors could present their ideas, sort of a “speaker's corner”; Paul had undoubtedly stood right there. Or the theatre in Ephesus, where he caused a riot; or the place in Philippi where the river goes past the city walls, and Paul presented the Gospel to a woman named Lydia and her friends, baptizing them on the spot. Reading the Scriptures in such places is an amazing experience, as you're standing right there – right where it happened.

But, of course, in May, we weren't standing right there. We were here, confined to our homes, wondering if and how and when COVID would strike. So we rescheduled the pilgrimage to this October; certainly it would all be over then! But that has proven optimistic. We've rescheduled one more time, for May 2021, by which time COVID will be just a bad memory. Wouldn't that be nice.

Of all the places I've visited where Paul ministered, I think the most disappointing was Colossae. Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus – all places to which Paul wrote, letters we have in our Bibles today - breathtaking. But Colossae, not so much. Because if you were to travel with me to Colossae, what you would see is a big hill. And nothing more. It's a nice hill, as hills go, but neither the money nor the interest has been sufficiently raised to stick a shovel in that hill and uncover the once-thriving community which existed underneath what is now the accumulated dirt and debris of the centuries.

What happened to it? Despite once being home to one of the largest churches in the whole Near and Middle East, St. Michael's, the Moslem invasions in the 6 and 7 hundreds crippled the population and the economy, and most people fled the area. The churches were abandoned, and the city left to decline, and finally even mighty St. Michael's was destroyed in a pointless civil war. For the last 800 years, Colossae was abandoned, reclaimed by the detritus and overgrowth of time.

But thanks to Paul's letter known as "Colossians," the early community of Christians lives still, and has much to tell us of how to grow in faith, how to persevere, how to follow Jesus. And we are going to spend the next 6 weeks doing just that – we will be twinning our church with theirs, and building our faith in Jesus together.

A bit of background on how we managed to come in possession of the letter which Paul wrote to them. He had been jailed for spreading the Good News about Jesus Christ, dragged off in chains to Rome, and was now under house arrest, awaiting an audience with the Emperor, if he could manage to kick his case far enough upstairs. In the meantime, though, Paul is keeping his missionary work going strong, by receiving visitors, encouraging the saints, and making sure that the many churches which he planted and which were started by people appointed by him, were going strong. And he did this through the two-thousand-year-old version of email. You didn't need a laptop, or the Internet, or even an iPhone – all you needed was some parchment, ink, and a willing soul with a sturdy pair of feet, willing to cart the darn thing 400 kilometres from Rome to Colossae. Those sturdy feet belonged to a fellow named Epaphras, for whom we should be grateful today. Paul tells us that Epaphrus' trip from Colossae to Rome just about killed him. And now he heads back, with the letter we have in our hands.

The thing is, Paul's writing a church he didn't even start – hasn't even met – people he doesn't even know – to encourage them, strengthen them, build them up, put them on the right path, and most of all – always most of all – tell them about Jesus.

And we here at Zion Presbyterian Church have intercepted this ancient e-mail of Paul to the new Christians at Colossae – perhaps he pushed the “send to all in your address book” button – and we discover that these words are oddly applicable to us, some 1960 years later, to we who also have not even so much as met Paul, to we who, like the church in Colossae, are in a society at odds with many of our beliefs, in a no-longer-traditional town with shifting values, wondering where in our busy lives our church actually fits. And so we'll listen to what Paul has to say – for he's speaking to us, every bit as much as to them. Listen (Colossians 1:1-8, CEV):

Paul, (stpaul@apostle.ca) an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy (timothy@newtestament.com) our brother,

To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae (www.visitcolossae.com) and Zion (www.zionpres.org): Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras and Rollwage (revdoug@zionpres.org), our beloved fellow servants. They are faithful ministers of Christ on your behalf, and they have made known to us your love in the Spirit.

It's nice to know that Paul is taking a personal interest in Colossae, and through them, in little old Zion. But it is even more humbling to realize that Paul, as an Apostle, is speaking on behalf of none other than God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, as well as Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. Have you ever thought about that? That God takes an interest in us? In our church? And in each of us personally? That he knows us by name? Where we live? What we do? How we are? *Grace to you and peace from God our Father*, writes Paul. God says, “Hi.” God brings to you gifts of grace and peace. With your name on it. Grace, to Scott, to Mary, to Ken. Peace, to Cathy, to Bob, to Vera. From God. To you. “Here you are, Anne,” says God, “A little something – a reminder – that I love you, and I'll never stop.” From me to you, says God. From me to you. *Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Paul continues his letter to us. *In our prayers for you (people of Zion), we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in*

Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Well, kind words. A bit embarrassing, really; we're not used to such praise. But Paul isn't only being kind, he's being accurate: he's heard reports of our congregation's faith in Jesus, and how it is has resulted in love for one another and for all the saints.

Saints, he calls us. You and me. Saints. Humbling again. I think maybe Paul uses that word to encourage us, to build us up, and to remind us that we're called to live up to a particular standard, that of "saint," no less. What's a saint? Someone who, through their situation, in spite of their situation, from the midst of their situation, does something that makes a difference in the lives of others, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Think about it for a moment. The most recent saint known to us all is Mother Teresa. She was not considered a saint because of her pious words. She was not considered a saint because of her knowledge of the Bible, or her ability to pray, or her powerful preaching. She was considered by many to be a saint because of her determination to make a difference in the lives of others in the name of Jesus Christ, even if those others in whose lives she was determined to make a difference were considered by much of society to be little more than garbage in human form. But Mother Teresa saw them differently; they were not garbage in disguise, they were Christ in disguise. She said the following: *"We cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love."* That's not a bad recipe for sainthood.

Now Paul tells us that he has *heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints*. How did he hear about this? Probably from the people on the receiving end of the love you have shared. Perhaps they heard about your love from a grieving family to whom you delivered a meal. Or from someone worried and alone in the hospital who received a card, a phone call, a visit. Or from a senior who thought they were forgotten, but who you took the time to contact. Or maybe they heard about your love from someone in the community who volunteered together with you, or from someone who was prayed for as they went through a difficult time, or from someone who didn't have to sit alone, mask or no mask. These, among countless others, are ways in which you have shown your love. And somehow word has gotten back to Paul, and now he, too, thousand of miles and years away, has *heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints*. He says more, too. He reminds us that,

"Your faith and love are based on the hope you have. What you hope for is stored up for you in heaven. You have already heard about it. You were told about it when the message of truth was given to you. I'm talking about the good news that has come to you. All over the world the good news is bearing fruit and growing. It

has been doing that among you since the day you heard it. That is when you understood God's grace in all its truth.” (NIRV)

Our faith and love are based upon the hope we have. You see, this faith and love we share is not just based upon good intentions, or a sense of obligation. It is based upon the hope we have, which we’ve “*already heard about,*” says Paul; “*I’m talking about the Good News that has come to you.*” The Good News that we are not alone, unloved, a product of random chance in a universe born of chaos; no, we are loved by God, who came to us in Jesus Christ, to show us a way out of our darkness:

God rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who forgives our sins and sets us free.

Sets us free to what? To love. To love. And we do need freedom to love, because love is a risk. Don’t think so? Fellows, think back to that first time you finally worked up the courage to ask that girl out on a date, or for a spin around the dance floor, or to the prom. To be rejected would have been devastating. But you took the risk. Because the prize was worth it.

Ladies, think back to the time you finally worked up the courage to pop the question to that special fellow – will you marry me? What if he said “No,”? But you took the chance, you asked him, and now, years later, he’s still the light of your life, he still has that twinkle in his eye, he still blushes when you bring him flowers. I know I do! All because you took that chance, that risk, and opened your heart to love.

As Christians, we are called not only to romantic love, but to Agape love, to love in a way that makes a difference, that changes a life. To love like that is to risk reaching out to those who might not appreciate it. To risk inviting those who may reject us. To risk opening our hearts to someone who might hurt us. To risk entrusting our finances to anything but our own bank account. To risk putting in an effort that will forever remain unappreciated and unseen by any but God.

It’s a risky business, this love, but we’re called to do it, and we’ve been set free from the tyranny of the Kingdom of Darkness (“**what’s in it for me**”) – to the Kingdom of Light (“**what’s in it for them?**”). It’s a major shift in attitude. A major shift in being. Like being born, as it were, all over again. It is a rebirth that makes us citizens of another kingdom, subjects of another King – because when you stop thinking “what’s in it for me,” and start living according to “what’s in it for them,” then, my friend, you are walking with your feet on earth but with an attitude born in heaven. The same attitude with which Jesus changed the world. And changed you.

Perhaps one last example from a citizen of the Kingdom of Light – the Kingdom of God’s Son – will help. This is a sign on a wall in an orphanage run by Mother Teresa, preserved to this day, and an insight into the heart of this determined, unstoppable woman of God:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

LOVE THEM ANYWAY

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

DO GOOD ANYWAY

The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.

DO GOOD ANYWAY

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable,

BE HONEST AND FRANK ANYWAY

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight,

BUILD ANYWAY

People really need help but may attack you if you help them,

HELP PEOPLE ANYWAY

Are saints supposed to be this cynical, this realistic? Well, she was. And she didn’t let anything or anyone get in the way of her living like Jesus.

It takes a certain freedom to live in this way. Thankfully, we have been given this freedom by God, the freedom to live by a different set of rules, a different standard, to dance to a different drum. And as we do, we too, like our friends in Colossae, “*may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. 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.*” That’s Paul’s prayer for the people he never met in Colossae. And it is Paul’s prayer to us – to we, whom he’s never met either. It’s a good way to live. And the only way to live the life that never ends. One foot on earth, one in heaven.

Thanks be to God who cares for each of us personally; who blesses us with grace and peace; who calls us saints, enabling us to live in love; and who has brought us from darkness to the light of his Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, through whom and in whose name we reach out in love to all the world. Amen.