

Christ at the Center

Colossians 1:15-28, Psalm 52, Luke 10:38-42

Last Sunday, as we looked at the beginning of Colossians, we found a prayer. Today our lesson from Colossians begins with a hymn--an amazing hymn about Christ.

Why does the writer put it here? Why did he think the Colossians needed to read it or be reminded of it? People who have looked into this letter closely have decided that the Colossians suffered from a problem that is all too common---a problem Martha suffered from, as well. They were “troubled by many things.” In Martha’s case it was too many distractions, too many obligations that kept her from listening to Jesus. What about us? Don’t we understand, all too well, Martha’s frustration? Do you live your life, as I do, with too many obligations, too many balls in the air, too much busyness? Someone has said, “ People who don’t know whether they are coming or going are usually in the biggest hurry to get there.” Does that describe us?

The many things that troubled the Colossians seem to have taken the form of different kinds of angels; they called them “thrones” and “principalities” and “rulers” and “powers.” “Wait,” you may say, “Angels are good.” Not if they compete with, or take the place of Christ! The Colossians weren’t sure about what they should do, so they looked to angels as the ones who brought them the messages of God. They looked to the rules and regulations the angels gave as their way of living right with God. Do we ever base our standing before God on other things, like being good and following the law? Do we say that we have to love Jesus AND keep the teachings of the Bible in order to be right with God? Do we fall into the

trap of thinking that being right with God by Jesus alone is not enough? Before we say, “Oh no, that’s not us,” let’s think. Aren’t there things we’ve done that we can’t quite forgive ourselves for, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, don’t we feel superior to people who aren’t as “good” as we are? If we were trusting just in Christ, would we feel in these ways?

Perhaps I could put this in perspective by reminding you of a young man who lived 500 years ago. This young man wanted desperately to be right with God. He read his Bible faithfully. He became a monk. He was meticulous in his adherence to the rules of his order. He even whipped himself at night when he was alone in his cell. But whatever he did never seemed to be enough.

Given his predicament, given the predicament of Martha and the Colossians, given our predicament, this hymn was needed. It has two very important messages for us.

The first message is about Christ’s relationship with God and with creation. Listen to these amazing words again:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.

This reminds us of those wonderful words at the beginning of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. ..in him all things came into being.”

You see how this answers the Colossians? Christ was there at creation. Christ is more important than any thrones or dominions or powers--more important than any angel. Put simply, if Christ created whatever powers there are, then they must be inferior to him, and as long as we have a relationship with him, we need not be bothered by their power. In other words, the grace of Christ is enough. We don't need to embark on heroic journeys of achievement to make ourselves acceptable to God. We can stop that religious enterprise, start trusting, and be free. Christ is more important, more worthy of our worship, than any of the rules or regulations or obligations that enslave us.

The second message of the hymn is an explanation of Christ's relationship with us. He is "head of the body the church...through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

Think of it--this exalted Christ, this one who was present at creation, has come down to earth to reconcile us to God! I have an image of the expansion, the unfolding of creation, the flinging out of the immense galaxies--the work of the creative cosmic Christ. And then I have another image: of Christ incarnate, Christ becoming human, and like a shepherd bringing together, bringing back, reconciling and reuniting everything to God--the work of the redemptive Christ.

One writer put it this way:

God had reconciled all things to himself in Christ. The resurrection of Christ makes this so complete that there is no need for angels. Christ gives us peace with God. Christ gives us the power of God to forgive and the power

**of God to have mercy. All that Christ has is ours by faith.
No longer do we need Jesus AND angels. We no longer
need Jesus AND doing what the Bible says we have to do.
Jesus is the full gift of God in whom we hope. Since he is
the fullness of God there is no room to add other things
to Jesus with the word 'and.' The grace of Christ is enough.**

**Since this is a sermon about a hymn, I thought we should include a hymn.
This one is based on the words of the scripture. Listen to the first verse:**

**Christ, You are the fullness of God, firstborn of everything.
For by You all things were made: You hold them up.
You are head of the church, which is Your body.
Firstborn from the dead, You in all things are supreme!**

**Given that this is true, how then should we live our lives? Evelyn Underhill,
wrote with great insight about spiritual matters. Here is the way she put it:**

**We spend most of our time conjugating three verbs---
to Want, to Have and to Do---
forgetting that none of these verbs have any
ultimate significance, except so far as they
are transcended by and included in the
fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being,
not wanting, having, and doing,
is the essence of a spiritual life.**

**This is what that troubled monk needed to learn 500 years ago, and he
finally did learn it. He read the words “The just shall live by their faith.”
and he finally understood that it wasn’t through following rules, it wasn’t
through punishing himself, it wasn’t through anything he could do on his**

on, it was only through faith in Christ that he would be reconciled to God. The grace of Christ is enough. The monk was, of course, Martin Luther, and his insight was greeted by relief and joy in the groundswell that became the Protestant Reformation.

Think of a potter. If he or she centers the clay, the result is a beautiful work of art. If the clay is off center the result is a wobbly disaster. So it is with us. If we are centered in the creative redemptive Christ, all will be well, but if we center our lives on anything else, anything that is not truly central, whether it be ourselves, or rules, or even the Church, the result is a wobbly mess.

Listen to the last two verses of our hymn:

Since we have been raised with You,

Lord, help keep our hearts and minds.

Pure and set on things that build

Your rule o'er all the earth.

All our life is now hidden with You in God.

When You come again, we will share Your glory.

Help us live in peace as true members of Your body.

Let Your word dwell richly in us as we teach and sing.

Thanks and praise be to God through You, Lord Jesus.

In whate'er we do let Your name receive the praise!

Amen

