

## Sermon Series on Colossians

The green seasons of the Church year afford the preacher an opportunity to focus on the letters of the NT as they are chosen to be read in a semi-continuous series. The Gospels don't touch on all the topics which the letters address, and this affords us a chance to delve deeply into these important topics.

Colossians may bring us to the most important topic for this generation: How God relates to his Creation. I say this is important for a couple of reasons.

1. The environmental question looms increasingly large. I have no idea as a theologian how to evaluate the science of global warming, but I know that people are concerned and most likely this concern is for a very good reason. Are storms getting stronger and droughts longer/deeper on account of human activity? I don't know and the preacher needs to be careful here, but care does not imply silence. Scripture has some very helpful and good things to say about the planet and the rest of creation about which we have properly been criticized for saying too little. This is an opportunity to speak to these concerns which your people likely have and to do so on the basis of the text.
2. The Enlightenment effectively severed the relationship of modern humanity from creation. This initially took the form of Deism and continues today, often under the guise of a "scientific thinking." The laws of nature govern everything from my personal health to the orbit of planets, and everything in between. God has largely been squeezed out of the day to day lives of most folks. We see this most acutely in their prayer lives. Do not presume that because you have people in church that they are not susceptible to this. In fact, I see a larger problem inside Protestant American Christianity than I do outside the Church. Outside the Church I see a strong movement to reconnect the world to the divine, whether that is the Gaia movement, New Age, or something else. The last bastion of Deism seems to be inside the pews of North American Christendom. This means a number of things for the preacher:
  - a. We become deistic in our thinking with God removed from everyday life, especially in our suffering. We will turn to pharmaceuticals for help in our pain, which is good, but we lose the connectedness of my suffering with Jesus' suffering when we do this. That is a real loss. Christianity has often taken great strength from the firmly held faith that my suffering is important because it connects us to Christ in his suffering and death for the whole world. Suffering has become only evil in our world – it is almost never described as a way for God to work in our lives. Yet, if you read the earliest Christians, including Paul, including his letter to the Colossians, you will hear a very different concept of suffering.
  - b. A distant God also changes the way we hope. We find that many of our people envision heaven as a non-physical, ethereal existence without bodies and without substance. But in a heaven without substance love is only an emotion and the cross is rather pointless. Listen in this letter of Paul to the Colossians as he speaks of Christ's redemption of the whole creation and the restoration of that whole creation to God the creator.

- c. This distant picture of God also does something terrible to the Christian life. When everything is spiritual and not physical, the suffering of my neighbor becomes something to which I can be indifferent. After all, the hunger of another human being is simply of the body, when in fact the flesh is evil and we know the spirit to be good. But this line of thought completely misses the incarnation of Christ. He took up physical human nature to redeem physical human nature, and the rest of the physical creation. That means that when we see another human being in need, we can see vaguely in their pleading eyes the eyes of our beloved Jesus. Our service to the physical needs of humanity through health care, care for the impoverished, relief of the stricken, or simply helping a little old lady across the street become imbued with a sacred character which both empowers the deed and becomes an occasion in which God strengthens the relationship with God.

In his letter to Colossians, Paul will address a first century problem which has a great deal of resonance with some of the ideas which are part of our world today. The ancient Greeks had looked about their world, seen enormous suffering, and concluded that God could have nothing to do with this sort of a world. In their idea of things, God must be pure Spirit. Of course, Christians could agree with that description of God, but they balked at the reasoning behind the conclusion. They differed from their Greek friends because the Christians had come from an Israelite root. Genesis 1 had said that God had made the whole universe, including the physical world. What is more, God had said it was good, he loved it, and he had promised to redeem it. What is more, and this is really important, Jesus had become a flesh and blood human being. He had eaten, he had slept, he had grown weary, and finally, scourged by Roman soldiers and nailed to a cross, he had died. This reality meant that they could not join their Greek friends in saying that God had nothing to do with this physical world. Indeed, they insisted that God was intimately connected to this physical world through the incarnation of Christ.

Paul's letter seems to address a congregation of folks who are really struggling with this. The Greek idea has real power for them. What is more, it empowers them in some very interesting way. If God is spirit and only spiritual things really matter, then those who excel at spiritual things must be more Christian than those who excel at physical things. Knowledge was a spiritual thing, especially knowledge of the spiritual. Washing dishes, caring for the body, scrubbing floors, and things like this were clearly physical and thus were lower on the scale of importance. The folks in Colossae seemed to have stratified their congregation with learned people considering themselves as more important and the servant class, the slaves, often uneducated, even illiterate, as being less important. Paul will smash this. He prioritizes love, not the emotion, but the deed. Thus the slave who lovingly cares for the children of her master is in fact as close Jesus as anyone else. Even though she cannot read, she participates in the love of Christ and thus is in the kingdom of God.

This will also give Paul an opportunity to reflect on suffering. Paul clearly sees his own suffering and that of other Christians as connected to the incarnate suffering of Christ. Here, and elsewhere in his letters, Paul gives us a new way to look at suffering in this little letter. It is evil, he never calls it a good thing, but it is not only evil. It has also been redeemed by Christ in his own suffering. Now our suffering is often the

vehicle for God's blessing and kingdom. Anyone familiar with theology will recognize the theology of the cross in this.

Another ramification of the Greek ideas of knowledge as the key was that it tied the whole thing up with power. Have you ever heard someone say "knowledge is power!"? Those words would have been very familiar to Paul's audience. It appears that some of the audience had seen the knowledge of spiritual things as a lever of power over the spiritual realm. By certain practices, words, and deeds, it appears that they were seeking greater enlightenment or progress in spiritual things. Often this took the form of asceticism, the rigorous denial of the self, or the following of arbitrary rules about diet and calendar. Some of the ideas herein seem to be similar to the little bit we know of Jewish mysticism. But we cannot say much about that because we don't know much. What is pretty clear from the letter is that some members of the community thought they were better Christians for following these sorts of rules, and they looked down on the slaves and others in their midst who did not understand or who could not read the same literature they were reading.

A few interesting facts about the letter to the Colossians which you might find interesting:

1. Paul never went there, at least before he wrote the letter. This makes the letter unusual, but not entirely. He also was writing the letter to Romans before he visited there.
2. In chapter 4 Paul tells us about the letter writing and distribution process. At the end of the letter he speaks of a letter to the Laodiceans (lost) and urges them to swap letters and read each other's epistle. He also commends to them the bearers of the letter, Tychicus and Onesimus, whom they know.
3. It appears that this letter may have been part of a four letter packet of letters which Paul posted from prison. The letter to Laodiceans has already been mentioned, but it is likely that he also sent Onesimus with the letter to Philemon since he also mentions Onesimus and Tychicus as letter bearers in that letter. This has led some to speculate that Philemon may have been a member of this congregation. He also likely included a copy of the letter to the Ephesians, which we are pretty sure was actually a circular letter to be read in all the communities in which Paul had worked or had connections. There are several sections of Ephesians which read almost word for word with Colossians leading many to believe that Paul penned both of these letters at the same time.
4. Colossae was a minor city on the main road into the interior of Asia Minor. Its name appears to be a pure marketing ploy by the city fathers. It was not really a "colossal" place. I rather think it is like the community in eastern Oregon which used to be known simply as "Baker, Oregon." It is right on the interstate, is the only place for many miles around it, and is a regional center, but not very large. Some years ago, however, the city fathers decided that they could market the place better if they added the word "city" to the name, so if you look on the maps of Oregon, you will find "Baker City, Oregon" today. It is a little presumptuous, but harmless enough.

5. Authorship questions: Both the letter to the Colossians and Ephesians are considered dubiously by Paul in some academic circles, but that opinion is slowly changing. Many years ago most scholars thought Paul did not write this, but thanks to the vigorous defense of Luke T. Johnson and others, that pendulum is slowly swinging the other way. Not that it matters for your people, but I thought you would find it interesting.

We will get four weeks of Colossians. The preacher might develop a sermon series from these readings:

July 10 Colossians 1:1-14

Sermon Theme: You and Me Through God's Eyes

*Paul does a masterful job in this part of his letter, a bit of rhetoric that often goes over our heads. He was addressing a group of people who thought they were pretty smart and the slaves whom the smart folks thought were less intelligent and therefore less fit for the Kingdom. If you look at the prayer, he thanks God for their love and faith – the very things the slaves excel at, and then he prays that somehow they might gain a little wisdom and understanding, the very thing that the smarties in the congregation thought they already had. All of this he prays so that they might love one another a little better. In effect he has rather clearly told the slaves that they are on the same level with the educated, and he has told the educated guys they have something to learn and Paul will help them learn it. By the end of the passage he has pretty well co-opted their language, the language of the educated. They had been telling the slaves that knowledge is what it took to really be in the kingdom of God. Paul tells them that Jesus has brought them into God's kingdom by his physical death and resurrection and the forgiveness of sins. This sermon will be a sort of vocation sermon, every good work bears fruit, when it is done in the faith and love which God has given freely in the Spirit. The stable boy and the university professor each play their part, none greater or lesser in the kingdom of God. For each may do his task in love.*

July 17 Colossians 1:15-29

Sermon Theme: United in Christ and United to Christ

*I have necessarily extended this reading. I cannot fathom why they omitted verses 15-20, they are the very heart of Paul's argument. They appear elsewhere in the pericopes, but even so, there is no problem with hearing this again, it is that good. Paul bases his argument for the letter upon the fact of the incarnation. God has created all things, he loves all things, he has, in the physical death and resurrection of Christ, reconciled all things to himself. This action of Christ has done two things. It has reconciled all humanity, all of it, even the enemies of God, to God, for all share in Christ's humanity. What is more, it has also rendered holy Paul's suffering and our suffering. This sermon will connect the suffering world, all of it, to God the creator.*

July 24 Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19)

Sermon Theme: Everything reconciled in Christ

*Building on the message of last week in which Paul said that in Christ God was reconciling the whole world to himself, Paul frees the reader from the judgment those who would hold up spiritual laws or other rules as the means for access to God. We have access to God, Jesus has come. He and His Spirit make us one with him, and He has liberated us from such legalism. We walk with him, how can someone tell us that we are not with him unless we observe this festival or eat this food or abstain from that? We walk with Christ. You would be surprised how tempting this is for people. We imagine that if we just keep the rules that God will notice us somehow. There is a terrible conceit in all this, a pride which borders on hubris but which infects so many. We imagine that God loves us the more because we go to Church, sing in the choir, or abstain from certain things. Indeed, going to church, singing in the choir and avoiding sinful behavior is a good thing, but it does not merit more of God's love or a higher place in the kingdom of God. What is more, humans are often in the business of making up new rules about things we should stay away from. My neighbor once told me that some of her family were good Christians, but the rest drank beer. It is true, excessive alcohol consumption is a bad thing and I probably should consume a little less, but is God really estimating my Christianity on basis of how many bottles are in my recycling bin every week?*

July 31 Colossians 3:1-17

Sermon Theme: A Mind Set on Heavenly Things

*I have again expanded the text, the pericope only gives us half the story and we need the whole thing. Paul exhorts us to think about heavenly, not earthly things. If you ask most folks about this, they will start to imagine Sunday School artwork about heaven, usually with angels, a cloud, a harp perhaps, maybe wings. But if you keep going into the list of things that flow from such thinking you come to realize that heavenly things are not up there, but right here. A bite of bread and a taste of wine are heavenly things. A splash of water and a hug from a fellow Christian are heavenly things. But so is feeding the hungry man or caring for a child. Jesus did this, and he is heaven on earth. Christ dwells in us richly hence we forgive, love, sing, and live in community with one another. This is the heavenly thing to which Paul enjoins. God has not called us out of this world, but into this world, to be the presence of Christ in this world.*