Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Held”* Colossians 1:1-14

Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae was written during one of Paul’s many episodes of imprisonment. Once again, he had been jailed for preaching the good news about Christ. Despite his own troubles, Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians because he has been told of their progress in the faith by Epaphras—a man from Colossae who had been in prison with Paul—presumably for the same reason: preaching the gospel. And so, Paul writes to them to congratulate them on how well they have received Christ. More importantly, he writes them of his vision for their future, a vision which has emerged from their faithfulness.

As we heard, Paul is excited for them, and he is gratified by their love for one another. Later in the letter, he will also share with them his concern for the pressures they were facing. It seems that the surrounding community in Colossae was filled with a multitude of cults, which is to say: there were many competing theologies and philosophies all around them. There were also other early Christian teachers who were encouraging the church to become more traditionally orthodox in their dietary laws and in regard to circumcision. Later, Paul will make a very good case against such criticism.

However, in this morning’s passage, the message we hear is Paul’s gladness. Paul is glad that the Colossians appear to be growing in the faith. In his prayer for them, he asks that they *“may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will”* so that they *“may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as* (they) *bear fruit in every good work”* [1:9-10].

Paul goes on to tell the Colossians how he not only mentions them in prayer, he says that he has *“not ceased praying”* [9] for them.

Most of us have expressed a sentiment close to what Paul has offered the Colossians. Often when we hear of a family member or a friend being in some kind of distress, we assure them that they are “in our prayers.”

However, few of us have ever said that we “pray without ceasing,” and as much esteem as we hold Paul in, when we come across such language, we wonder if this could still be mostly an expression, perhaps a “turn of phrase,” or an eloquent way of expressing deep caring—with, perhaps, a bit of hyperbole.

What I would like us to imagine this morning, is that Paul was not exaggerating or embellishing. Let us take Paul at his word that he did, indeed, pray for the Colossians without ceasing.

It must have made the Colossians hugely gratified to have received such a gift. Prayer is always a gift, but to be held constantly in prayer is a truly amazing gift…but it also begs the question: what does this mean?

It might help if we remember what else Paul writes in this brief opening passage of his letter. Paul is especially glad to hear that the Colossians are “growing” in their faith. He writes especially of their “bearing fruit,” and being “fruitful.”

Although this is meant to be a compliment, at the same time, it is does not seem to refer to a special event in their lives. Instead, to describe them as “growing” in the faith could be another way of referring to the daily business of living—as we live, we grow.

Apparently, the Colossians had moved from *hearing* the gospel to *living* it, and the proof of that is their *“faith in Christ Jesus”* and ofthe love they displayed *“for all the saints”* [4]. Their love for one another was the proof of their growth. Their love *was* their growth and it meant that they had moved from one stage of development and into another, a more mature stage.

What Paul is celebrating in them is how the whole life and heart of this community was displaying the true marks of life in Christ. They were daily showing how faith, hope, and love were present in their lives in the way they treated and cared for one another. And through this kind of caring, they had moved from a collection of individuals to being one body in Christ. They had come to wholeness with Christ and each other.

It was this “wholeness in Christ” that Paul resonated with because it was his way of life, too. This is what connected him to the Colossians. The love they had learned through their faith in Christ was the same love Paul knew and preached. It was what connected him to this church and all others who love as Christ taught.

And because they were so intimately connected, he was able to say, without exaggeration that he was praying without ceasing for them. Their mutual wholeness in Christ made them a part of his heart, and him a part of theirs.

Because of their faith—their wholeness in Christ—the love they showed one another would have been grounded in generosity, even sacrifice. This means it was a love that chose honesty and honorable actions in all areas of life—in business, in friendships, in family matters. It was a faith and a way of life that inspired them to look for the image of God even in people who held a different point of view, and to be at peace with them.

What Paul was doing was supporting them in the hope they had found in Christ. By believing in the love of Christ, the Colossians were able to know calmness of mind and spirit. This is what love can do for us. It is also what can make for a better future. It will especially make for good ministry in Christ’s name, because it will be a ministry based on honorable conduct, and grounded in wisdom that has an ethical dimension.

This is the good fruit Paul alluded to—the kind of fruit that grows in the human community when we are held unceasingly in prayer, and when we do that for others; when we are able to bring the whole of who we are to stand before Christ, *and beside our brothers and sisters, even the ones with whom we do not agree.* As hard as that is, we do it because this is what growing in our faith calls us to do.

We are to love and make connections with others and not only because it will make for a more bearable present, but because of the implications such connections can have for the future.

Broken connections make for a broken future. To keep connected to one another’s humanity is to have hope. To pray without ceasing is to constantly keep hold of one another, to never give-up on each other, but to cherish and believe in one another’s humanity—yes, even in the face of so much evidence to the contrary.

When someone asks why, I find I always come back to my very favorite passage in the whole of the Bible. It is in Genesis [32:22-32], the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. He wrestles with him all night. As the dawn begins to break, the angel says, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob says, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Jacob got his blessing: a new name, Israel, and reconciliation with his brother.

To pray without ceasing is to be like Jacob—we must keep hold of God. We must keep believing that God is present with us, is blessing us, and that the love God has given us is always good and is always wrestling us into the future God has in store for us.

In fact, (just in case you have not noticed) all of this love and faithfulness is oriented toward the future. We are held in love and must hold on to the love we have for others, *not* because it will change the past or the present, but because it has everything to do with how the future is going to unfold.

As one commentator has written: (in his letter) “Paul is creating a ministry for the future, based on the conviction that decisions should be made *today,* with an eye towards peoples’ needs *tomorrow.”*

It is like the story of that paper goods company. They make paper goods and cleaning supplies actually, the company called *Seventh Generation.* You have probably seen their products in the store. Perhaps some of you have even used them.

Their name, *Seventh Generation*, is very important to them. So, if you look on their packaging, they explain where the name came from. It is based on a Native American philosophy. The ancient Iroquois believed and lived with the notion that *“in our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”*

In other words: if their future loved ones were going to have a life of goodness and plenty, they were going to have to live, love, and sacrifice accordingly—this is what creates and maintains hope and the future. This is the message that echoes all throughout Paul’s letter, especially when he speaks of fruitfulness. It is also what the 16th-century mystic Teresa of Avila believed when she wrote:

Christ has no body but yours,No hands, no feet on earth but yours,Yours are the eyes with which he looksCompassion on this world,Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,Yours are the eyes, you are his body.Christ has no body now but yours.

Friends, know that you are held in the love of God—constantly and completely. And because of this, we know how to love with that same goodness and if we are willing to be fruitful, then we too will know the same joy the Colossians did, and have the same claim to a future filled with hope. And so, I pray that this will be true for us today, and always. Amen.