

Welcome:

Announcements: Special Offering for July-Local Meals on Wheels

Fellowship of Love: Please greet your neighbor

Song

Call to Worship

L: We come into God's presence,

P: like green olive trees in the house of God.

L: We drink deep from the waters of life,

P: like young saplings in the courtyard of the Lord.

L: We ripen in the light of God,

P: like the fruit of God's vineyard.

L: Come! Let us worship.

Unison Prayer

Loving God, your presence in our lives is like a green olive tree--a joy to the heart and a blessing to the spirit.

Your movement in our midst is like a basket of summer fruit--a delight to the eye and a pleasure to the tongue. Speak your words of life to us that we may sit at your feet and know that we are yours. Amen.

Offering/Special Music-RJ Gill

Scripture: Colossians 1:15-28NRSVue

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,

¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

²⁰ and 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.

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,

L: The Word of God for the people of God.

P: Thanks be to God.

Message:

The hard part of this week's messages is to figure out where to begin. Including today we are spending three weeks in the letter to the Colossians. So, whenever I decide that we do stuff like this I prefer to start with some background material first. Before we do that, however I want to acknowledge something about this passage, and that is as I am sure you felt when it was read, it feels wordy. What I mean by this is if you are like me, this passage seems to string words together for deep theological meaning and I get lost. When I read it, I think the whole time, well this is nice but so what? The language and the way things are strung together are not conducive for my mind to grasp what is being said. The reason I wanted to acknowledge this is because I find that many of us struggle with understanding different parts of scripture and we may not get confirmation from those around us that they struggle with the same stuff.

Ultimately this means that I have to figure out what the core of the passage is in order to relate it not just to you but to myself. In order to do that we do need background information on this letter to help us understand what is going on. First let us ask the question; was this was written by Paul or not? Scholarship is actually divided on this issue. Those who claim that Paul did not write this book point to some of the common reasons that I have given you over the years. The language used is not Paul's normal language, it is not his syntax or grammar. I have used other examples in the past, but you can use the difference between east coast, west coast and midwestern. Each has a different pattern of speaking and different ways of phrasing things. Using that you can identify where a person is from or living. Ya'all would be viewed as southern, while you'se would be viewed as Pennsylvanian, at least I have never heard any other place use that verbiage. They mean the same thing but there are some assumptions you can make about those who are saying it.

There is a response to this to support Paul's authorship. That is that this letter deals with a theological subject matter that Paul does not deal with in any other letter so of course he would not use the same language, he would be developing the language in the argument. This makes a lot of sense to me, and I feel that there are enough people on the fence over whether Paul wrote it or not to assume that Paul did. With that in mind this letter is thought to have been written while Paul was imprisoned in the early 60s in Rome, and is addressed to one of the churches that he planted during his missionary work in what we would call modern day Turkey.

The issue Paul is dealing with in this letter specifically is dealing with a theological line of thought called Gnosticism. Now we know a lot about Gnosticism, but

we know very little about Gnosticism from Gnostics. What we know about this religious thought is what the people who were against it wrote and said about them. As you can imagine, this is not necessarily a very fair process. If you only hear one side of the conversation you make assumptions about who your opponents are then.

Some of the things we know about Gnosticism is that it practiced the idea of syncretism, and secret knowledge. Both of these concepts Paul is taking aim at in this opening section. Syncretism is the idea that when we worship Christ/God we are worshiping the same thing as everyone else. This is a difficult topic, and I want to remind you that we do need to be sensitive to those of other religious practices. However, I want something else to be perfectly clear. The goals of different religions are in fact, often very different, so at the end of the day while we can work together, seek commonality, and seek to help others to say “we all worship the same God” is incorrect. In Gnosticism, the way this represented was to claim that God revealed God’s self-most recently through Jesus but through the eons, which is a specific term for Gnostics, God has been present in the world in the same way at other times.

Now I know there will be some confusion around this, so bear with me. Our passage today clearly makes the case that Jesus and God are one and the same. It is a reinforcement of monotheism, so Jesus is not an extension of God, or a representative of God, but is qualitatively and quantitatively God. Gnosticism argued, essentially, that Moses is the same as Jesus; he represented a different eon. So, we claim that Jesus is God, Gnosticism would say yes, but on the same level as Moses. Of course, for Gnosticism, this would not be limited to Jewish thought. The second part is the secret knowledge which we are not going to dive into here today, but essentially Paul is laying all the theological cards on the table and saying we know this about Jesus, and it is not hidden from anyone.

There is a side item of note really quickly and that is that I think there is an explanation for some of this wording difficulty and that is that this section is a poem. More specifically it is a hymn and arguably the oldest portion of the New Testament. Paul essentially took a hymn that people sang about Jesus and quoted it here. The problem is not the words but how we decided to look at prose writing and poetry writing. If we assume this is prose it is more difficult, when we know it is poetry I think it is easier to understand.

So, let us get to the heart of this passage and what it means for us today. I think all of us desire to be a part of something special. For some this is expressed in their work, or career. I have met plenty of pastors that being a pastor is what defines them, same is true of teachers. That is who they are, and they fully believe that makes up everything about them. There are others who find their meaning in family and the continuation of family, or in their culture or race. For Paul, Paul is showing us that when

we want to be a part of something greater, that we are a part of the church. We are a part of a group who is defined by who Jesus is and what we believe about Jesus. Our definition of who we are is nothing compared to who we are as a church.

I want to point to something for you to focus on, because this question of who you are is not one about individuality. It is a question about who the church is. Paul is not writing to you; he is writing to *us*. And since he is writing to *us* we together have to say who it is we get our meaning from. I know for a lot of us this seems a very simplistic question, we are Christians we go to church so we are obviously defined by Jesus. However, I have been watching this be called into question for the past 10 or more years. I have often asked the question are you American or are you Christian? Because they are not synonyms. If you define your Christianity, or assign values that are Gods values to other entities than you have to question whether you are in fact Christian.

Hear me out. As Christians we have to be careful of attributing things that are only Christ/God to others. It is kind of like the saying, do not attribute to malice what could easily be stupidity. In other words, sometimes people hurt others, and they are not actually trying to be mean, they just did not think about what they were doing. If you put anything, and I do seriously mean anything, before God-that is idolatry. Our call is to examine who we are as a church; do we follow through whom all things flow? Are we seeking to put Christ first, or are we more interested in our own agendas? I invite you to think and pray on that this week, let us be who we are called to be, Amen.

Pastoral Prayer/Lord's Prayer

Song

Benediction

Song

Goodbye