

The Hopeful Community

October 16, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Col. 1:3-6

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— ⁵ 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 ⁶ 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.

Rom. 12:10-18

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

There will be times when people approach you, because you are operating in their sphere of influence, and begin opening up their heart to you. They may share about something that happened to them or their family recently and ask the question, "Why is there evil in the world?" Or, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Or something similar, and your first reaction might be, "I wish the pastor was here to answer these questions." You may rationalize that response by thinking, "I am not knowledgeable about the Bible enough" or "I am just not that good a Christian yet" or something along those lines. The problem is, if you simply say, "You should talk to my pastor," then that will pretty much end the conversation, because I can almost guarantee you that they will not go out of their way to ask the pastor those questions. They may not even know the pastor. And they are likely intimidated by the pastor. There's a reason that person has

asked you those questions. They know you. They trust you. And you are the one that God has placed in that time in that place in that circle of influence in order to speak into that person's hurt and brokenness. So, what are you to do?

First of all, when people ask questions like that, they are really asking the question behind those questions. They want to know, "Is it true? Is what I have heard about Jesus really true?" So, to respond to that question, you need to ask yourself, "Is it true about Jesus? And, if I say it is true, why do I say it is true?" That is when you can share your story. You can't argue with a story. You are sharing something about your life that reveals why you believe. Perhaps it was from recovering from a tragedy of your own that led you to a faith in Christ. Perhaps you were raised in the church by a family member who knew it was important for you to have a firm foundation on which to build your life.

Second, Even if we're not good at sharing our story, we can get better. We may offend someone by sharing our story but the sacred worth of the person we are sharing it with as well as the potential gain in abundant life and everlasting life make it a risk worth taking. If you really want to get good at something, you need to practice it.

Third, whether we realize it or not, we are already sharing our faith. All Christians share their faith. We share our faith by the way we treat each other and the way we treat strangers. We share our faith when we are being waited on in the restaurant and while we are checking out at the grocery store. People may not know who you are, but they ought to be able to tell you are different (peculiar was the word we used last week) just because you treat them as more valued than most other people treat them.

Try this. The next time you are in a restaurant, be intentional about saying something nice to the person waiting on you. Many people will either just ignore the waiter or waitress unless they want a refill or when they are displeased about how their food came to them. Perhaps my eyes were first opened when my own children were waiting on tables or working at a grocery store, and I was amazed and appalled by how they were often treated. Waiters, waitresses, store clerks, the person gathering up your shopping carts in the parking lot, the people who gather your garbage off the curb each week, they are all people too, trying to make a living and trying their best to make this system we call society work. Be glad they are working at what they are doing. There are many other people who are not contributing at all and it is impacting our world economy. Every person is important. Every life matters. Every person was made in the image of God and is loved by God. When you mistreat others, you are mistreating God. Jesus told the parable about the King, the King who was in essence himself, who replied, *"I tell you the truth: whatever you did for the least of these..., you did also for me."* (Luke 25:40).

In Colossians 1 we read about Paul praying for God's people. He wrote: "...because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—⁵ 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 ⁶ 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.

Paul writes of the hope that is stored up in you – stored up in you as individuals and as a community of faith. Hope is what we have to offer the world. Our story is grafted into the story of Jesus, which is filled with hope. There are four parts to Jesus' story of hope:

1) Death. Paul writes in Colossians: *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God* (Col. 3:3).

Jesus died on the cross. This we all know. But the fact that we, by faith, participate in that death is not often taught, even though it is mentioned in many of Paul's letters. Paul is reminding the Colossians that they have died and that their life is hidden with Christ. Though they were not on the cross with him, they participate vicariously in his death. In another sense, they have died. Their old way of life ended. They have died to the narratives that once controlled them, the ones told in the kingdoms of this world, the ones that tell us "might makes right" and "money gives you joy" and "sex is the way to fulfillment." Those old idols have been smashed by the Christ narrative, and we enter into that story.¹

2) Resurrection. *...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead* (Col. 2:12).

Many Christians are not aware that they also participate in the resurrection of Jesus. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead also lives in us. The old you and me were dead, but the new you and me have been raised. Elsewhere Paul wrote, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are new people, in whom Christ dwells. This awareness not only gives me strength as an individual, but it binds me together with other Christ-followers.

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (p. 49). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

There emerges a new me, a new self, established by Christ. We have put on a new self (Colossians 3:10), which is being renewed constantly. I have a new identity: one in whom Christ dwells and delights. This is not my doing; it is by the power of God, the same power that raised Jesus from the tomb. I go forth in that power each day, as one who died but has been reborn. Jesus' resurrection is also my resurrection. That is my new story.²

3) Ascension. *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1).*

Jesus died and rose again, and then ascended. Some people think the ascension of Jesus was the day Jesus flew away, never to be seen again. In fact, the ascension of Jesus is an important part of the story. Jesus is now enthroned as the supreme Lord of all. Jesus now reigns, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Paul tells the Colossians to set their hearts on things above, which he explains is "where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." Notice that Jesus is seated. That is because his work is complete. To set our minds and hearts on "things above" means to focus on the finished work of Jesus, the source of our hope and strength. We find our unity in that common vision.³

4) Return. *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:4).*

The final part of the story has not yet occurred. The church proclaims, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." The return of Jesus is the promise of ultimate healing and justice. All of the wrongs will be made right, all of the pain will end, and our joy will be made complete when Jesus comes in final victory.

We are members of Christ and of the kingdom of God because we have entered into the larger story of Jesus. This is not merely to make us feel special or secure (though it certainly does); it should also lead to a change in behavior. The story creates a new identity, which in turn leads to new practices. Jesus' story becomes my story; I am then in Christ, and as one indwelt by Christ my behavior begins to change.⁴

² Ibid., p. 50.

³ Ibid., p. 50

⁴ Ibid. p. 51-52.