

“WITH WHOM TO IDENTIFY”

A Sermon Preached by Ann Hamel

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Colossians 1: 11-20

Is everyone ready for Thanksgiving? It's not too far away. It is a day we give special thanks to God for all God has provided, a day which most of us celebrate in some way with family and friends or even spend it quietly at home. Most thanksgivings, when my sister is not scheduled to work, I travel to her home in Ohio. I rarely know who else will be there but I am not too surprised when I am greeted by pet Yorkies. My sister has 2, my niece has 2, another sister 2 and my brother has 2. Imagine 8 Yorkies with their high pitched voices all barking at the same time. It's quite a welcome when I walk in the door. These little dogs are fascinating to watch as they seek attention from the people that are present and/or appear to want a more prominent place in the pack barking and growling with one another to see who is going to be on someone's lap, first at the food or the one to have the favorite toy. Sometimes they can get really loud and then someone with greater authority steps in. You guessed it one of my sisters, my brother or niece and then there is peace-- for a time. But know for sure these Yorkies are loved.

As I have watched the news with the political issues, the demonstrations, various opinions of different people, read various posts on Facebook that somehow come to me, which are not from friends that I follow, with comments made by various individuals, who I do not know, sometimes to be honest, it reminds me a little of my family's Yorkies, all seeking attention, wanting to be heard with their various opinions and perspectives. Some groups and individuals even appearing to be seeking more prominent positions over others, which would give them more power and control in fulfilling their specific desires. And I wonder what would happen if they really listened to each other and recognized a greater Authority.

So what does this have to do with our scripture for today. It appears from the reading of this letter to the Colossians that even in the early years of the Christian church, there were controversies. Groups of people and individuals seeking recognition, seeking followers and seemingly seeking more prominent places above others for support in their specific beliefs, perspectives and philosophies. The church in Colossae was faced with these types of dynamics. This church was located in a diverse community of native Phrygians, Greeks, Jews, Romans involved in politics and various other ethnic

groups. The church included both Jews and Gentiles. We could possibly say it was located in a somewhat pluralistic culture similar to the culture we live in but not to the grand scale of numbers of people, conveniences, media, means of travel and communication. This group of people, this church had received the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, but they were being challenged by various other teachings that caused Paul to warn them saying “see.. that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Quoted text from the NIV version of scripture).

Apparently there were people teaching that Christ was not the fullness of God or could not be both human and divine, people advocating for restriction on what one could eat or drink, on what rituals one must follow for certain holy days or new moon ceremonies, people insisting on pious self-denial or worship of or with angels dwelling on visions they had leading to false pride. These teachings could have been separate or all mixed together. And I wonder if these people in this church did not in some way feel like they were in the midst of chaos , what to believe, which way to go, who to trust, with whom to identify.

Then Paul, who has been identified as writing this letter along with Timothy hears what is going on and is deeply concerned that Christ, who he is and what he has done is being depreciated, being placed as one among many possible perspectives and/or philosophies for salvation, threatening the foundation of the church. And so he writes by introducing himself as someone with authority to speak, as an apostle of Jesus Christ chosen by the will of God. He goes on to establish a connection with the people of this Colossian church which was started by Epaphras and which he had not visited. He does this by letting them know that in prayer he has always thanked God the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ for their faith in Christ and the love they have for all the saints, meaning all God’s people. This faith and love as a result of the hope they had heard through the gospel. The gospel which was bearing fruit among them ever since they had heard it and understood the fullness of God’s grace. Then after a few more opening remarks, Paul focuses on the one who has supreme authority over all creation. He addresses who Christ is and what he has done. In a sense it is a hymn of praise, an affirmation of faith. Using the New Living translation of this passage, Paul establishes the identity of Jesus Christ as the “visible image of the invisible God” who “existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation “,and why is he supreme? because “through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth”. Because “He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers and authorities”. Because “everything was created through him and for

him. And because “he holds all creation together.” This person Jesus Christ is the “head of the church, which is his body”. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. “He is first in everything” and why is he first?— “for God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself”. God “made peace with everything in heaven and on earth” through Christ’s blood shed on the cross.

What greater love than this that Jesus Christ fully divine, fully human in his humanity gave his life that we might be in relationship with God for eternity.

So, how does this apply to us in this time, in this culture, as the church, the body of Christ. It seems that we are faced also with many different perspectives, philosophies being advocated by various individuals and groups on issues as to what to think, what to believe, who to support in what some have described as a post Christian, post truth culture. And as these different perspectives come at us from many different directions especially through the media and entertainment industries, what do we do? Do we begin to identify with a specific person, group, perspective or philosophy or do we turn first to Christ and trust Him to guide us through the chaos? And how do we discern which direction Christ is leading? In response to that question, I would say that as a disciple in relationship with Christ, It would be through the time spent with him in prayer, in conversation, in the time spent searching and knowing him, his nature, his teachings through scripture always with an attitude of humility under the guidance of the Holy spirit, and through discovering and experiencing His presence in the awesome design of all that God has created through Him.

And of course depending on the issues, in addition We might also discern and receive guidance by the Holy Spirit through studying the writings of our church forefathers who were also faced with various philosophies and perspectives, taking into consideration the context in which they were written, through some present day reliable resources and through conversations among present day committed followers of Christ. Our in-person conversations with one another and in groups are valuable for in our own studies as members of the human race with our human imperfections, we may lean to areas that support our perspectives and fail to get a full picture of all that is involved. These types of Conversations are ones in which we may grow to know one another better, ones that value the other person, that contain elements of listening, acknowledging, sharing, elements of curiosity that help to understand another’s perspective, and the reasons and experiences that have influenced them in their perspective. These types of conversations in which we may respectfully agree or yes disagree but are willing to learn and to maintain relationship build up and connect us together in unity as the whole body of Christ.

And as the whole body grows together, we may be better prepared to reach out and to share our faith and the love of Christ with those who are seeking, questioning or may not have a relationship with him. May all conversations we have with others be filled with the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

Jesus has ultimate authority over all creation. He has given his church, all of us a purpose and a mission and that is to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and to teach them to obey everything he has commanded.

So, as we live in this present day culture in the midst of what may seem like political and social chaos, let us embrace Christ and his teachings above all else and let us always remember that he, who is King of kings and Lord of lords has said "I will be with you always."

Let us pray:

Faithful God, you have appointed us your witnesses, to be light that shines in the world. Let us not hide the bright hope you have given us, but tell everyone of your love, revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Resources

Holy Bible, New International version
C 1973, 1978, 1984 International bible Society

Holy Bible, New Living Translation
C 1996, 2004,2007 Tyndale House Foundation

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version
C 1989 by Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America

Life Application Bible Commentary Philippians, Colossians, Philemon
Bruce B. Barton, D.Min. Mark Fackler, Ph.D, Linda K. Taylor, Dave Veerman, M.Div.
C 1995 by the Livingston Corporation

Exploring Colossians & Philemon
John Phillips
C 2002 by John Phillips

The New American Commentary Philippians, Colossians, Philemon
An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture
Richard R. Melick, Jr. PHD