

Colossians 1:1-14

This Hope

At some point each day I head into our backyard to check out our garden, and at this time of year Ken and I are consistently checking out the bushes that bear fruit. We have raspberries, saskatoons, concord grapes, and cherries. We are pretty excited as this year is year three for each of these bushes and they are loaded with fruit which will become jam or jelly, pie, or frozen for use another day. There is something absolutely delightful about watching the unfolding of this process, from blossoms to berries that are first green and then turn colour at which time they are ripe for harvesting. Our favourite part is taking the fruit from the tree, particularly the saskatoons and raspberries and eating the berries right there and then.

In this letter to the Colossians, Paul was writing to encourage a community of faith to stay faithful to the gospel so that they can bear good fruit. This is an interesting letter. First of all, there is much conversation about whether or not Paul actually wrote it, but that does not affect the direction I am going with this scripture today. However, for simplicities sake, I will assume that Paul was the writer. It is certainly written in the style of how Paul would write. It is also interesting to note that Paul was in jail while writing this letter and yet was filled with hope and encouragement for these people. Another important point is that Paul was writing because there was a lot of false teaching going on in the small community of faith.

They started off well enough, though it was not Paul who began this work with them, it was a man named Epaphras. I have to admit, I had not even noticed this before, had not paid any attention to the fact that this person was named and given credit as a beloved fellow-servant and faithful minister of Christ on behalf of the church in Colossae. Now Epaphras has let Paul know of the people's life and faith. Paul has also learned that there are others leading this group of Christ followers astray and he is writing to encourage the church and teach them the truth of the gospel. We don't get into all of that this week in the portion of scripture we are looking at, but it is important to have this background as we approach these opening verses of the scripture.

Paul's recurring themes, that can be found in other letters, of faith, love, and hope make an appearance here. You may know the scripture from 1 Corinthians 13 that ends with and "Faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love."¹ Well in the case of the church in Colossae, hope was the starring attribute. And it is good to pay

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attention to this as it gives us a clue to what the message was that the people needed to hear in that time and place.

When I was in seminary one of my preaching professors said to us, “You are preaching to a particular people, in a particular time, and a particular time.” This time Paul needed to emphasize the hope that he has, the hope that was for the church in Colossae, and the hope of the Gospel which is Jesus Christ. Though this is an ancient letter there is still much for the church today to learn from it.

Now I don’t often follow a scripture verse by verse when preaching, but I think this may be the best way to approach this particular piece of writing. It begins with a greeting, which sets up how Paul wants people to understand themselves and who he is and, as it turns out that Timothy is also with him. He writes, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

Then he goes into the themes of faith, love, and hope. Remember Paul was writing to correct their thinking and understanding so he says, “³In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴for we have heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of the *love* that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the *hope* laid up for you in heaven.”

Listen now as he continues for that extra emphasis on hope, “You have heard of this *hope* before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.”

...You have heard of this *hope* before in the word of the truth, the gospel. This is where our hope is...it is in the gospel story telling of Jesus and what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Any other understanding about Jesus or God’s will take us off course from the hope that we have in Christ. I am going to my favourite dictionary on these types of theological words as edited by Rolf Jacobson. This is how hope is explained there...

Hope: The promise of a future worth the trouble it takes to get out of bed in the morning.

Intimately related to Faith and Love, and quite unlike fear, dread, and sarcasm, hope is one of those things that we human beings cannot generate from within. Hope starts to grow inside of us when a promise is spoken to us from the outside. Theologically, this means hope is our response to the gospel, and it means hope has the same invigorating and optimism-producing properties as a great cup of coffee on a cold, dark morning. In contrast to strong java, however, the effects of gospel-induced hope are longer lasting (we are promised eternal life), free (we don’t have to pay for hope, not even for fair-trade, organically

grown hope), and of some benefit to our neighbor (because we have hope we also have love for the neighbor).²

And this hope is what holds this piece of writing together. Paul's hope for the people, the people's hope then and our hope now of what this truth about Jesus Christ means for us.

And how do we know we have hope; it is through the bearing of good fruit. Bearing good fruit, for the Colossian's and now for us is the consequence of living life in the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit that comes from God and from Jesus living and moving within us. It is about the grace of God and comprehending the depth of that grace, grace which promises life now and eternal life. This grace promises forgiveness, meaning and purpose each day for you, for me, and for everyone.

Bearing fruit is about living life with meaning and purpose, caring for yourself and family, but also being sure to care for others that God puts in your path or on your heart. We do this as individuals, but we also and importantly do it as a community of faith, just as those to whom Paul wrote were a community of faith...the church.

And then there are the two verses about Epaphras where Paul writes, "This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow-servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, ⁸ and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit." I lift him up because we so often think that it was Paul who did all of the teaching in these fledgling communities of faith, yet the gospel, the stories of Jesus were being told by many others. We are not told how Epaphras learned about Jesus but we do know that others learned about faith, love, and hope, the grace of God because Epaphras told them about it.

It is important to remember that the only way people will know what the gifts of faith, love, and hope of God can do to transform their lives is if we talk about it and or demonstrate it. If you are someone who has never picked up a Bible and no one has ever talk about their faith, how can they possibly come to know of the love God has for them?

You don't have to be a preacher, you just need to incorporate your faith into your conversation in ways that say that this is important to you, that this faith community has something to offer in terms of faith, love, and hope. Or maybe it is hope, faith, and love. Just as Paul emphasised one thing over another depending on the need of the people, we too can share what might seem most important for someone to hear in any given circumstance.

Now the next part of this opening from the letter is a prayer and I am going to use it to close this message. I could go on and pull it apart verse by verse but that is a whole

² Jacobson, Rolf A., Editor. *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffey Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008.P 88.

other sermon. So instead, I am going to suggest a couple of things. One is that you can use this prayer to pray over yourself or someone else, roughly putting your name or the name of someone else where the pronouns are. Something like asking that Joyce may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, and so that Joyce may lead a life worthy of the Lord...

Today I am going to close with the name of our church in those places. This letter was written to a community of faith, and we are one as well, so this is my prayer...our prayer...for this church using Paul's words...

We do not cease praying for this congregation of St. Andrew's and ask that we may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as we bear fruit in every good work and as together we grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May St. Andrew's be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may we be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And as Paul opened the letter I now close with the words, Grace to you and peace from God our Father. May you go into this next week with faith, love, and hope bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God's will for you, for our church, and for our community.

I speak to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.