

# “Worthy Living”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – July 10, 2022*

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 25:1-10

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Colossians 1:1-14

“We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.” (v. 4-5)

Faith, hope, and love – these three – show up several times within the Pauline letters. Like Galatians, which we looked at over the last three weeks, this letter was written to saints of the early church from prison. And yet, the authors can still proclaim that God has rescued them – liberated them – from the powers of darkness so they can be redeemed in the kingdom of light.

Many good things have been reported to the letter’s authors about this young Christian community in Colossae. They are bearing good fruit and growing in their understanding of the grace of God. It may seem to defy logic that bearing fruit precedes growth, but – as we, in this church, have experienced – it is often what we do that develops what we know and comprehend.

And so, we seek to bear good fruit in our community and beyond. We long to care for one another which results in deepening of relationships. We seek to nurture the young so they can grow to know and experience God’s grace. We look to feed, clothe, and house those who are in need, thus creating a healthier community and a deeper comprehension of the gospel.

This biblical language of fruitfulness goes all the way back to the beginning, when – in Eden – the first family is commanded by God to “be fruitful and multiply.” (Gen. 2:28) In the Jewish tradition, faithfulness and fruitfulness are intimately linked: faith is made manifest in the fruit of the soil as much as in the wellness of the soul.

Therefore, the authors assure their addressed congregation members, “we have not ceased praying for you.” (v. 9) Prayer is not simply an intellectual activity – it is more than just thinking about God: not everything can be reduced to reason.

In ancient Jewish understanding, the heart was the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral energies. The heart, which includes reason, is also the center of perception and understanding. Prayer does not limit our relationship with God to interesting words, right thoughts, or pious emotions. By its very nature, prayer will change us and draw us closer to God.

Thus, if one understands prayer as only an intellectual exercise, to “pray without ceasing” conjures up visions of a marathon prayer session of endless words. If, however, one sees prayer as an exercise of the heart that involves all aspects of life, then to pray without ceasing is to understand that prayer continues when talking to others, doing yard work, participating in meetings, or even sleeping. Prayer of the heart is the active, constant presence of God’s spirit at work in one’s life.<sup>1</sup>

The ceaseless prayer of this letter’s authors was that their readers might be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, “so that you might lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear good fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.” (v. 10) Again, here, doing good works leads to an increased understanding of God; bearing good fruit creates greater growth in knowledge, not the other way around. The goal is not to acquire abstract information but to be transformed ever more deeply in the story of Jesus. Without growing in this knowledge, without being more fundamentally shaped by this gospel story, the community will become barren, devoid of good fruit. No wonder that psalmist this week prays, “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are my God and my salvation, for you I wait all day long.” (Psalm 25:5)<sup>2</sup>

This letter to the Colossians will paint for its readers a vision of the cosmos breathtaking in scope, with Christ as the firstborn of all creation (1:15); and Christ’s faithful saints in this and all places dwelling with Jesus in the heavenly realm. (3:1-4) The letter’s moral vision contains a summons for this small group of believers to inhabit their newly exalted status as God’s holy, beloved, and chosen ones. (3:12) In Colossians, living the gospel means understanding who – and where – you are.

We all have felt the difference between knowing something and *really understanding*. It is one thing to be able to parrot the facts – to say, for example, that we understand salvation. But it is something else entirely to have felt the truth of it; to have seen with our own eyes or felt in our hearts the transformation that

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Nishioka in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 3

<sup>2</sup> Brian J. Walsh from *WorkingPreacher.com*

takes place when we are liberated from that which has held us in bondage. It's one thing to know theoretically that we have been transferred by grace from the power of darkness to Christ's kingdom of light; but, it's another thing to truly comprehend it.

It is only this deeper comprehension – what Colossians calls “spiritual wisdom and understanding” (1:9) – that bears fruit in a transformed life. The authors' prayer, then, is that the Colossians believes will see beyond their present circumstances to the full, Christ-shaped truth of things. Then, with the truth of reality unveiled – and confident of their place in it – they will be remade in this image of Christ.

Therefore, where we are – as followers of Christ – is in Christ. Through the knowledge of the gospel that has been presented to us, we are adopted into a new community – grafted into a new family – of believers. We belong to Christ; still, Paul knows that we will need strength from above and discipline within to maintain our faithfulness.

Our physical health, the wellness that we have worked to achieve and maintain, can be lost if discipline falters. Our weight creeps up if we ignore what we know about proper nutrition and the importance of exercise. It is the daily discipline of good choices and long-term practices of self-care that bear the good fruit of wellness.

So it is in our faith journeys. If our congregations are to emulate the faithfulness noted in the Colossians – if we are to keep bearing fruit, corporately and individually, that nourishes the communities and contexts of our ministries – then we must attend both to the daily disciplines and long-term practices of the faith. In so doing, we are readying the soil, planting the seeds, and pruning the vines for bearing good fruit.<sup>3</sup>

If where we are is in Christ – attending to the daily disciplines and long-term practices of the faith – then who we are, our core identity, is as those seeking to live lives worthy of Christ. Faithful churches grow – by grace – in the knowledge of Christ they have received. This growth is evident in the visible and behind-the-scene fruits of faith, hope, and love present in the community.

Thus, we are challenged to pay close attention to our daily disciplines and long-term faith practices. In what ways are we looking to increase our understanding of God? Are we seeking to pray without ceasing; not as an intellectual exercise, but from the heart and in our whole being? Has our salvation

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan Kirkpatrick, “Have We Fruit?”

in Christ prompted us to ground ourselves in thanksgiving? And will we lead lives worthy of the gospel, seeking to bear good fruit that will lead to growth?

If Christ is, indeed, the firstborn of all creation – and those who believe in him have been summoned as God’s holy, beloved, and chosen ones – then God’s reconciliation of the cosmos through Christ becomes embodied only through the daily life of the church; the universal scope of the gospel is animated in worthy living locally. Faith, hope, and love – these three – are thus made visible in the here and now, by and through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.