

I don't know if you've noticed but there seems to be a lot of chatter and chaos going on. There are any number of distractions that are filling our minds these days, taking up space. Today, and this week feel like a culmination of many of those things as we honor those who have joined the church triumphant in the past year, as we honor those who have died from a pandemic that has in many ways placed our own lives on hold over the past eight months, as we gather just days before national elections that have proven to be more divisive than any in recent memory, and all while still looking ahead to a new year, new opportunities in our ministry together.

Today we remind ourselves that we are here to re-focus to re-center, to move away from the chatter and the chaos that so easily distracts us and to focus instead on Christ. Christ whom we find within ourselves and Christ whom we find within one other. So you are invited to do just that, to re-focus your attention for a moment on the Christ within you, so that in the week ahead you may see Christ in others. Let us turn to our second reading from the epistle to the Colossians, chapter 2, verses 1-19. Listen for God's word to you this day:

For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. ² I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in Christ, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

Deception with plausible arguments, empty deceit, human philosophies, these are all the identifiers of chaos that seem to be taking place in Colossae. To which the writer counters with a deeply intimate and embodied understanding of life with Christ. This text is not our lectionary but does contain our stewardship text for this year.

Listen to those verses again: As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

We chose verses 6 through 8 to anchor our stewardship focus this year because we felt it intentionally spoke to the circumstances of this year, living in the time of COVID. We have at times felt disjointed, as though our roots are pulling a little too loosely rather than standing firm, and much of our thanksgiving has been overshadowed by all that chaos and chatter I mentioned earlier. This text reminds us of our life in Christ and the ways in which Christ calls us to a faith that is deeper than the circumstances that surround us, a faith that leaves us abounding in thanksgiving when we focus on God's presence rather than the distractions of the world. It is a text that speaks just as powerfully to us today as it must have to the church in Colossae centuries ago.

There is conflict happening in the church in Colossae that seems to be centered on what those who claim faith in Christ can do or not do, a need to establish who is in and who is out, encouraging the writer to speak to what is important about being a child of God, who embodies Christ for the world.

The writer speaks about laws pertaining to food and drink and festivals, all outer actions that are used to judge one's character, all human ways of establishing who is faithful and who is not. But the writer says these are all just distractions, these are the ways of creating chaos that miss the point, God's mystery, Christ himself. To the point that the writer says, you think these things matter but God is much bigger. God is alive in you even when others may say you aren't being faithful, he says: And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Isn't it remarkable: God's action has nothing to do with us. Our creator wants for us a life that is beyond the chaos, BEFORE we choose to recognize Christ within.

I think we often miss the point of having a relationship with God by expecting to always get it right, to always know the answers and to check the boxes of the things we think we are supposed to do. But, just like the first hearers of this text, there is room for growth. We were dead and God claimed us. There is space in this great mystery of God for us to change. And like rooted trees, built up in Christ, we are meant to grow in God. This is why faith communities are crucial throughout our entire lives, from birth to death. It is in these communities where we should be able to experience that growth, to experience Christ transforming our lives as Christ dwells within each of us.

The disconnect and chaos that is reflected in this letter is about missing a foundational point about who Christ is and who we are in relation to Christ. God has

made us alive with Christ, before we even know it, and before we can consciously understand it. God did not create us as divided beings with separate body and soul that need to be in competition with one another. But rather we were created as whole beings in whom Christ dwells and as we become more attuned to that, more aware of Christ's eternal presence within ourselves, our response becomes one of abounding thanksgiving.

This goes against much of what the modern world has taught us about how to view ourselves. It is much easier to separate our understanding of Christ out, and set it aside, to not see it internalized to who we are, to separate our faith life from our everyday, out there in the world life, because once we do that separating we can buy into the chaos and chatter around us that would have us see others as the enemy or less valuable. To making ourselves exceptional based on the world standards. And, in so doing, discounting the presence of Christ within us. We block the path of the Holy Spirit that is inviting us to partner with God to bring about God's kin-dom here and now. We try to make ourselves exceptional by ignoring the very essence of the living Christ within us.

But, we are not exceptional because of where we live, because of our selected denomination, because of the families we were born into, because of the education we received or the material possessions we have accumulated. We are exceptional because we are children of God, created to embody Christ in all we do, and to live vibrantly, joyfully, abounding in thanksgiving for all that God has created within us, for

the Christ that we carry within us. We are exceptional because God made us and we carry part of God with us in everything we do.

This scripture draws us back into ourselves, our identities in Christ, an identity filled with mystery and opportunity for growth, an identity that far outweighs any identity we could find elsewhere.

The wisdom and knowledge of Christ is within us. We are called to embody that, to live rooted in faith that is integrated holistically with Christ and leaves us abounding with thanksgiving. We are invited to live out our lives as stewards of God's creation in union with Christ. That is exactly what stewardship within the life of the church is all about. It is the way we make commitments to that oneness we have with Christ, honoring its presence within us, to live our days connected to it, not disconnected or compartmentalized from it.

By committing our time, talent and treasure to the care of all God's children we are saying to the world, we will not be distracted by the deceit you offer, we will not be at war with our own bodies, we will not deny Christ in others. We are furthering a community seeking to faithfully embody Christ.

You are encouraged and invited to consider the ways you plan to embody Christ through commitments of time, talent and treasure, to the ministries of Grace First. We cannot be the body of Christ without you. So we ask that you offer in the ways that you can, the exceptional you that God created, so that the life of this body can continue to reach out to our community and one another in the name of Jesus Christ. And, I pray

that through our commitments we may more perfectly embody Christ so that the chaos and the chatter of the world falls away and we each find ourselves united with the Christ within.