

“SHARING TOGETHER”

Colossians 1;3-14

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Paul’s letter to the church at Colossae is a little different from his other letters in that he didn’t actually know the folks there from having visited or worked with them. He’s just *heard* about their faith in Jesus, and about how they’ve demonstrated their faith in love and in actions. But though he doesn’t know them personally, simply *hearing* about a community committed to love in the name of Jesus encourages him and makes him grateful. So the prayer of thankfulness and hope with which he starts is typical of his communication with the various early Christian communities he wrote to.

He wants them to know that he’s praying for them, too, praying that they will understand God’s will, and live lives worthy of the Lord. There’s maybe just a little hint in there that he has some concerns about them – hence the letter. But before he gets to that (which he will shortly) he first lifts up these powerful hopes and prayers he holds for them: spiritual wisdom and understanding, knowledge of God, good work, strength and endurance, patience, joy and thankfulness, lives that are pleasing to God.

From the rest of what Paul writes, it’s evident that he’s concerned about false teachings which might be influencing in this community in a negative way. The common thread seems to be the promotion of various cult-like notions about how to know God: an emphasis on asceticism and self-abasement and rules; pursuit of special, secret, mystical knowledge not available to everyone; a lot of attention to angels and spirits. Paul’s message, basically, is that in Jesus Christ, the Colossian Christians already have all they need. His prayer is really for them to understand this not just with their heads but in their hearts and bones, so they won’t be susceptible to these distortions of the faith. He wants them to live joyfully together into the life to which God has called them. He wants them to experience God’s presence and power flowing through their community.

A couple of things to note here:

Paul’s words carry a sense of developing, preparing, learning, growing into the fullness of life in Christ. The Christian life isn’t a static state but a process of becoming. Yet he’s also speaking very much in the present tense about a process that’s well underway. The Colossian Christians are to understand themselves as belonging already, unequivocally to Christ.

The faith Paul holds up for them is the opposite of the kind of anxious striving inherent in rules and special knowledge. He reminds them that their strength comes from God’s power; *God* is the one who has given them an inheritance of faith, released them from

the power of darkness and forgiven their sins. They don't have to figure anything out or earn it or pay for it. It's already done.

And ... there is an inherent connectedness in this life of belonging to Christ. It's not just that they are connected to *God*, but also that God has enabled them to "share in the inheritance of the saints in light."

This isn't a promise of heaven by and by; it's about the kind of life that Paul (and I think we could say Christ) envisions for his people. It's not about me securing my spot and you securing your spot, or about achieving personal holiness, but about a *shared* participation in God's good gifts and in the communion of the saints.

All Saints Day celebrates the communion of the saints. This day invites us to remembrance of those people of faith who have gone before us, especially those whose lives have in some way invited us into the light that is God's presence. This day opens up our grief a little bit, or maybe a lot; but we don't have to bear it alone. We are surrounded by other saints who understand and grieve with us and pray for us and love us through it and help us to hope. Together we find strength to persevere and reasons to be grateful. Together we keep on learning and growing and living out what we believe. The light of God's presence shines on us, as much as it does on the saints who have gone before us. We help each other to stay in, live in, keep walking in, that light. What a gift this is!

There is responsibility too, though, in sharing in this life, in being connected to God and God's people. It's more than theory or sentiment or pious sounding words. It has to be, if it means anything. It has to have something to do with how we live and how we hold on to our faith every day.

We spend a lot of our lives out of touch with this connectedness we give thanks for on All Saints Day; our culture celebrates individualism, independence, self-reliance, self-determination – and we've often brought those values into our practice of Christianity, even into the way we interpret scripture. But what if we went the other way? What if instead we bring the value of connectedness from the scriptures not just into our life together in the faith community but also into our life in the world? What does that mean?

It means we persevere in the struggles for justice and equality, we don't give up on them, because how can we talk about sharing together in God's good gifts while some of our sisters and brothers are excluded from them? It means that when we go to vote we think more about the common good than about self-interest. It means we give what we can, because we believe that the community of faith matters and that the church's job is to do Christ's work in the world. It means we hurt over the world's pain. It means we give thanks for the religious communities – people we don't know personally, folks whose faith we have only heard about - Muslim, Jewish, Presbyterian, Catholic, and other people who come together in solidarity after a hate crime at a synagogue... for all the people who walk in the light.

It means we make up our minds to walk in the light, too. It means we have to ask God every day for the strength to resist hate because we understand that God's intention is for us to be connected to one another, not divided from one another. It means we seek understanding. It means we care about truth and resist false narratives and stereotypes and fear mongering. It means we look for ways to partner with others to do things that help and heal.

It means we pray for each other. It means we celebrate and encourage each others' gifts. It means we are always ready to open the door and expand the circle. It means we care, not just about our own children and grandchildren, but about *all* the children.

It means we understand that faith – not just beliefs, but this *way of life Christ has called us to together* – is not just our inheritance but our legacy as well. So we pass it on. We don't always get it right, but we trust God's grace to make it right and so we have hope for the future, in spite of ourselves.

And when we make baptismal promises and welcome another of God's children into the communion of saints, we do that with joy and confidence and gratitude for all that we share together, praying that we may shine the light of Christ on this child's path.

Amen.