

Colossians 1:15-20
Seeing the Center
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We're now in the second week in a series of messages entitled *Becoming the Kind of Community Jesus Intends*, where we're studying Paul's Letter to the Church at Colossae. In our first Sunday, what seems like an eternity ago, we read Paul's opening prayer for this church, where he prayed that their faith be rooted in the knowledge of the gospel. Faith, for Paul, begins not so much when we have a certain feelings about God, as it does when we hear this Word and believe. Faith begins with knowledge, with hearing, and as the great theologian of the 20th century Karl Barth said, it comes when we realize that what is spoken in the words of Scripture are also true about me. When we hear it and we believe it.

Second, Paul prays that the people in Colossae would live a life that is worthy of Christ. He uses the word *axius*, or congruent. Our prayer is that you would live a life that is congruent with the gospel, a life worthy of Christ.

And lastly, he prays that their hope would be strengthened by endurance. And I told you about my experience of running a marathon, and how the most joyful moment in that entire race was not crossing the finish line, it was getting in my car to go home and having the engine start, and the wheels still be intact. Notice, Paul doesn't pray that they would have joy, or that they would have a good experience of worship, or that they would feel a certain way; he prays that they would be strengthened with endurance, and with endurance comes joy, finishing the race, keeping the faith.

Now as we turn to our next section, I want to invite you to turn with me in your red pew Bibles, or the one you brought with you. Or if you are a technophile and have a smart phone or tablet where you read your Bible take that out and open to Colossians 1 beginning at verse 15, which can be found on page 184 of your red pew Bibles.

This is one of the most beautiful Christological (Christ-centered) hymns in the entire Bible. And because it's so beautiful, I want to invite you to stand with me, as you are able, and let's read this in unison together. Colossians 1 verses 15-20, and when I'm done I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord," so that if you believe it to be true, you can say, "Thanks be to God."

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of this word inspire it in our hearing as well. Amen.

**Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;**

These are the opening words to a famous poem by WB Yeats written in the wake of the destruction of World War I. And as I listen and imagine with my mind's eye, I picture circling over a field of prey, in widening gyres, with nothing to be found. And as it circles wider and wider, it gets further and further from the voice of the falconer, who alone is able to beckon it back to the safety of their perch.

We all live lives that rotate in an orbital movement. Our daily rhythms dictate how we spend our time, where we go, the people with whom we interact, the stuff we buy, how we use our leisure time, etc. Each of these, it seems, even has its own pull that tells us where we should be spending our time and energy. Bosses who constantly demand more, lead us to say, "I need to lean into my job right now." Hobbies and leisure activities that give us those moments of respite from our family, say to us, "You deserve a little more time on the practice range or in the tool shed, the family is fine." Convinced that anyone of these will lead to greater happiness, all that happens is our orbit, our gyre grows wider and wider, and pretty soon the falconer is no longer within earshot. Things begin to fall apart.

I also wonder if this image can also be a picture of a worship that has become irrelevant. Rituals and practices that turn and turn in ever widening circles so that they are no longer able to hear and return to the voice of Jesus. Debates about music, hymns, or praise choruses, organs and pianos or guitars and drums; talk of liturgy, is it a dead practice that no longer speaks to the modern hearer, or is it the very countercultural vocabulary of our faith, that speaks the Word of God amid the overwhelming and incessant rambling of our culture, bla bla bla—how's that for an argument for liturgy? It doesn't matter if these arguments are as old as Rome or as new as yesterday, prayers and songs and silence and sermons can turn around and around in a widening circle entirely lost to the voice of God, as they circle over a city and a world that is perishing without a center. Things fall apart.

You see, a worship that doesn't have any impact on the Monday through Saturday of our lives is no longer within earshot of the center. If what we preach and proclaim on Sunday doesn't have an impact on how we live our lives, then we are not grounded to the center. If they are not connected to the living hope of Jesus Christ, then things will fall apart.

The believers in the church of Colossae were in danger of becoming disconnected like this. The worship practices and rituals that were creeping into their life together were drawing them away from the faith in Christ they had learned from Paul's friend Epaphras. So Paul writes them this beautiful, majestic hymn that centers on the center, Christ Jesus, who he says is the image of the invisible God.

And this is what makes the Gospel such an exciting and enlivening thing. God literally was enlivened, God took on human form in the person of Jesus to give us who are mortal and finite, a concrete picture of who God is and what God is all about. I love the way Eugene Peterson describes this action, that we call the Incarnation, in his Message paraphrase of the Bible. John 1:14 he paraphrases by saying,

“The Word of God became flesh and blood and moved out into the neighborhood.”

What a beautiful picture of how our lives can move out from inside these walls and remain connected to the center. Jesus comes into the world and just starts movin’ around. Meeting people, having coffee, coming over for supper, spending time at the park. I love the verse in Hebrews 13:2 that reminds us that **in showing hospitality that you may just be entertaining angels unawares.**

Paul continues by saying that Jesus is the first born of creation. Now, he’s not saying that; Jesus was God’s first created being, suggesting that there was a time when Jesus was not. Paul is actually employing an Old Testament rhetorical phrase that implied status or royalty. He is referring to the sovereignty of Jesus. He’s also drawing it into New Testament context by connecting it with the cross and the redemption that took place on Calvary. As the resurrected one, Jesus is the first born of resurrected life.

Jesus is our center, Jesus is the one around whom our lives can turn in consistent and meaningful fashion as long as we are connected to him as our center. And Paul goes on to say, in Jesus Christ not only were all things in heaven and on earth were created. “In him, all things hold together.” Not just church things, or things at home but all things—even the things that are about profit and performance. Not just the things we have done well and are proud to place in his hands, but all things—even those we are ashamed to give him. We all know how difficult it is when, in the ever widening gyre we feel like we have to hold it all together. Jesus holds it all together, not just the things we don’t control, but even the things we do control. All things hold together in Christ.

In these five verses, the author uses the phrase “all things” five times so you cannot miss the point. You cannot say, “But not my addicted child. It’s too late.” All things. You cannot say, “But not Israel/Palestine. It’s too complicated.” All things. I love the words of the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, “There is not one inch of the world that Christ does not claim saying, ‘Mine. That belongs to me.’” This doesn’t mean that the world looks like it belongs to Christ, or that all people have to wear the label Christian. It just means that the God who is with us in Jesus Christ can be found in all things. He holds together what we cannot. The center of a life that pulls in every direction is Jesus Christ.

But it’s tempting to come here and think that if we just give Jesus his due that things will be alright everywhere else, that church is just one of the competing pulls. Paul goes on to say that it was through Christ we were reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This is the place where we gather to be renewed in that vision, to be re-centered and knit more tightly into Christ, who by his blood, by the gift of the cross and the reconciliation we meet there, gives us peace with God in the midst of life's chaos.

Most of you by now have probably heard about Dr Kent Brantley, the young doctor with Samaritan's purse who is serving the people of Liberia and has contracted the horrific disease Ebola. And in the wake of this news, we might be inclined to ask ourselves, why a person would even risk the smallest chance of coming in contact with something like that. Between the lines of many of the reports that applaud his heroism we read is an underlying attitude that this was a foolish thing for a person to do. Why not stay here, stateside and hang that medical degree on the wall of a new and lucrative practice?

Well, perhaps it was because Kent understood the beauty and meaning of Paul's great Christ hymn here in Colossians 1. That all things, whether here in America or over there in Africa, hold together and bear the imprint of Jesus, and that he can be at peace even now as he fights for his life, and we join our anguishing and fervent prayers together for him. But because of the pure, holy, and life-giving blood of Jesus, not even Ebola, not even drug addiction, not alcoholism, not depression, not a crumbling relationship can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Who with every fiber of his being reconciled you and you and you and hold you together by his love, because Lord knows we can't do it on our own.