

Sorting Out the Truth (Colossians 2-3)

Wander around any bookstore; browse the blogs out on the web, or peruse the religious section of podcasts and it is a bit overwhelming to realize the diversity of voices that are contributing to the cacophony of Christian thought today. Everyone from bestsellers like Joel Osteen to Rick Warren to Rob Bell to broadcasts of worship from the Crystal Cathedral to devotionals or magazines you read to the very words that fall from my lips every Sunday; all of this culminates and congregates, sometimes colliding and contradicting, inside our minds. For the truth is all of these voices are vying for your attention. Like trying to fly a kite in a strong swirling spring Wisconsin wind, these voices swoosh this way and that. The result can be this dizzying or disorienting effect when you enter the fray and sort of take stock of ideas about faith stirring around you. It doesn't take long to realize that there are significant differences in the way people are interpreting the Christian faith. So, how do you sort through what is authentic or true? Which voices today help guide your faith or inspire new understandings? Which voices do we trust and which do we automatically tune out? And before we begin to bemoan the complexities of life today or wax poetically about some simpler time, it is good to hold all this in tension with what our Colossian brothers and sisters were experiencing.

As you wade through the second chapter of Colossians, Paul's reason for writing becomes a bit clearer. He writes about this internal struggle he feels because he has not seen them face to face. Now perhaps Paul is lamenting the fact he cannot be there in person, look them in the eyes and offer his advice or perhaps Paul is wrestling with the reality as some have claimed that he never actually traveled to Colossae, but rather it was Epaphras who he named in the first chapter, who founded this church. There is this uneasiness sitting in Paul's stomach, but it is not just about being able to be present, there is something deeper going on here. For Paul wishes and prays the Colossians would have assurance and the knowledge of God's mystery; who wouldn't want that? How many times do we look toward the sky with a silent prayer or shout at the top of our lungs for God to show us the way. We might sing about a "Blessed Assurance" and talk about a 'peace that surpasses understanding', but most of the time, if we are being honest, we can feel like we are muddling through life. Some kind of guarantee imprinted on our church bulletins or the sound of harps and light revealing the way we are suppose to go; you know I'd even settle for an email or a text from God, I mean I realize God's busy. Something we could grasp onto and know without a doubt that we are doing the right thing, acting the right way, on the right path, rather than second guessing our decisions or wondering how the other person really took our sarcastic remark when we were trying to be funny.

To be sure, our human attempts to offer someone else who is going through a difficult, turbulent time in life an assurance or spiritual knowledge can sometimes come across as trite. Just as when others offer us their story of a time when they went through something *just like us* often feels like unwelcomed or at least unsolicited advice. Paul goes on to write that he prays for this assurance and knowledge 'so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.' We have that cliché that goes, "fool me once shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me'. To be sure, we don't like to be lead astray, we feel embarrassed. Confidently state incorrect information someone else gave to you and see if you don't hesitate ever so slightly the next time that person passes along an idea as fact.

We become leery once we feel as though someone has misguided us, suspicion swirls within. I've noticed this in me as spring seems to have brought out the door to door salespeople knocking with an unbelievable offer just for me. Or I hear how writers and media personalities

take information out of context just to make a point. Working through the mental gymnastics of sorting out what is truth and who we will trust is part of life both inside and outside the church. Given the fact that plausible arguments are more prolific than the dandelions in my yard, we sometimes find ourselves clinging only to those voices that sound most like our own rather than actually engaging in the sometimes exhausting work of listening and talking to someone who comes at things and sees things from a completely and wholly different perspective.

So, the Colossians were right in the very middle of trying to sort through two very different understandings of faith. At some point, I suspect someone passed through the community and told the Colossians they were not practicing and living the faith in the right way. Paul writes later in chapter two these words, "Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths." We can make an interpretative leap that the matters this itinerant preacher who passed through Colossae preached about food and festivals and how all that could be practiced the right way in the faith. Sometimes when we feel like we are flittering around, unsure and uncertain which way to go, having someone clearly say to us, "Just do this" can feel like welcome relief and reassures us. But what can happen is we can get so caught up in doing things just the right way or believing a certain way or even going through the motions that we miss the life giving, life changing dynamic relationship with God.

Paul's concern for the Colossians is that when we reduce the mystery of God to platitudes that need only our mental assent rather than fully open our whole lives to God's presence which moves in new ways each day, we've missed the point. So, if faith will not be confined to a certain set of practices or doctrines, where does that leave us? Moreover when we encounter these diverse voices with plausible arguments how do we know which will lead us to truth and toward a deeper connection with the sacred? Paul's alternative to dogmatic boundaries is this litany of words we heard from chapter three. Now, Paul is known to lay it on thick. Like fudge frosting on a chocolate cake, more is better in Paul's world. Rather than just leaving the Colossians with the idea of putting on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience; which let's face it the weight of just those five words feels as heavy as a wool winter coat. But, Paul goes on to say, bear with one another, forgive each other, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and oh yeah, clothe yourself with love, and if that is not enough be thankful too. Are your shoulders starting to slouch just a bit, yet? But Paul is not finished. Teach and admonish each other in wisdom; isn't that part of the problem? Oh, and before Paul forgets, with gratitude in your heart sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God. Do you start to hear how Paul can lay it on thick, are you with me? I have always sensed that Paul had a great sense of humor and I think part of the point of this lengthy list was for the Colossians to realize just as there is absurdity with being able to always live out all of these qualities **all the time**, so too the expectations the itinerant preacher who passed through concerning food and drink and festivals was also a bit absurd.

However, I don't think clothing ourselves with qualities of kindness, humility, love, forgiveness, peace, and letting our voices sing out with gusto was meant entirely as an attempt at humor. In fact, one of the ways I try to sort out who I listen to and seek to not be led astray is to see if the words I hear are spoken with kindness, humility and love. Are the words coming at me through the radio or podcast or television filled with forgiveness or just wanting to score points and filled with malice? When we sit around meeting table here at the church, are we seeking to embody kindness and understanding, or do we hold onto grudges and past pains? To be sure, Paul's advice on what to cling to might make us long for a church and living our faith that does not demand so much out of us. Wouldn't it be easier if we just had to be nice, believe the right things? I think Paul is at once both challenging us and inviting us into a faithful life that

is both counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Clothing ourselves, so that people see and sense and experience in their interaction with us a kindness, compassion, patience, love, forgiveness, thankfulness that radiates from our very presence with a hymn of joy is a tall, tall, nearly impossible order. To be honest, there are and will be times we just don't feel like it, both inside and outside the church. There will be times we'd just as soon gossip and roll our eyes and think less than gracious thoughts and judge; and then come to worship go through the motion of prayers and offering so we can repeat the cycle. Paul offers us another way, a rockier path and one that is not at all easier. And yet, clinging to kindness, loving our enemies, seeking reconciliation, forgiving, listening openly, trying to be genuinely thankful it is those qualities that I think that captivate us most about who Christ is, draw us here, connect us to the One who creates us, and it is when we manage by the grace of God to live these characteristics that we feel the sacred stirring us and helps us decipher which voices are true and which are deceiving us.

And so may you this week let this litany of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, peace, love, and gratitude sing out to your heart, echo in your mind and maybe even begin to be heard in your words and your actions. Listen to the melody of the voices that come into your life, are they in tune with this list or are those voices dissonant? Are you in tune, do others who bump up against you this week feel your compassion and kindness; or do they feel anger and frustration? And can we continue to encourage each other, support one another, and work with each other to let compassion and kindness and humility and forgiveness and peace and love and a joyful song of thanksgiving ring out so loud for our community that it becomes an infectious melody heard throughout this city and into the world? When that list leaps off the page of scripture and inscribes itself upon our hearts, compelling us to live in new ways, extravagant grace and unconditional love no longer are just part of the cacophony of Christian voices, but rather by God's grace become part of the sacred melody of God's still speaking voice. May we have the courage and faith to enter and live out the sacred songs of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, peace, love, and gratitude this week and for countless weeks to come.

Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"