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November 24, 2024, Agape meal

Deuteronomy 8:7-18, Colossians 1:1-14

Bearing the Fruit of Faith, Hope, and Love

Our New Testament Passage this morning is attributed to Paul, and written to a church in Colossae, located in modern day Turkey. A church he had never been to, a congregation he had not met. Paul heard about this church through a fellow follower of Christ, Epaphras - a servant of the Gospel, like Paul. It was likely read aloud to these Christians, who were probably gathered in someone's home. Imagine for a moment that your particular table is not set here in this sanctuary, but in someone's house and you are about to hear these words for the first time.

Listen now for the word of God in **Colossians 1:1-14**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for 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.

You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.

This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This is the Word of God for the People of God.

**Thanks be to God.**

Here we are, talking about hope again!

Hear the opening another way . . . because of the hope you are waiting for, a hope found in heaven, we have heard of your faith and your love for all Christians.

The author tells us this hope is known from the gospel. “You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you.” The gospel is the kingdom of God soon to be set up. The Good news of God’s grace made real in the person of Jesus. This kingdom, unlike the ones of the time of Colossae or ours for that matter - is a kingdom that is built on God’s commandments to love God and love one another.

We heard in the text from Deuteronomy that Alex read - that obedience to God leads to life and we hear that theme again here - obedience to God through Christ is bearing fruit - in the world and in the congregation at Colossae.

I wonder if you have ever watched a tree bear fruit? We had a cherry tree in the backyard where I grew up. I remember watching every spring as the light pink buds slowly formed and opened, bursting forth from the dark, bare bark, with a beautiful, sweet smell. Then the leaves would start to come out, and the flowers would fade. In their place, cherries would grow - the tree bore fruit and we couldn’t wait to taste it!

Bearing fruit is what a cherry tree is meant to do, despite diseases and pests, drought and rainy seasons. Even in bad years there is some fruit, and that fruit feeds the animals, who in turn plant the seed for the growing of another tree, which in turn, if nurtured, will bear fruit too, carrying on its purpose after the parent trees are gone.

Like the cherry tree, the church is meant to bear fruit - the fruit of faith and love born out of hope that one day, despite wars, injustice and hatred, the neglect of those in need, dehumanizing of others, and disregard for creation, God will set things straight and all of us will live in peace.

Like the cherry tree, the fruit of faith and love born out of hope gets planted in the world and among us, here at PCO, so that the Gospel continues. Clinging to that hope, we bear the fruit of faith and love. If we cling to fear and disappointment, we bear other fruits, likely not those of God's kingdom, but of the powers and idols of the world.

It is because of this faith, hope and love that Paul and Timothy continue to pray for this new gathering of Christians. And what is it they ask for this congregation in prayer?

That they “ may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” This knowledge of God's will is not one from book learning but one from being connected to the Holy Spirit and listening, really listening for God. Spiritual wisdom and understanding are found through prayer, and our writers are setting an example for the hearers.

The second part of the prayer is that they may “lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”

Leading lives worthy of the Lord is the intertwining of bearing fruit in good works and growing in the knowledge of God. A life worthy of God requires that we bear fruit in good works - namely that we spread the good news of Jesus through our faith in him and by loving neighbor, stranger, and friend with agape love - love that is selfless, love that works for the good of every person without needing reward or recognition, and, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. NY: HarperCollins, 1993. p65.

Leading a life worthy of the Lord also requires growing in knowledge of God - reading and studying the scriptures.

The two cannot be separated - for reading and studying the scriptures teaches us the how and why we lean into the hope that feeds our faith in Christ and our love for God and one another. Jesus talks so much about what the kingdom of God looks like - and it is active - planting, sowing, sharing, forgiving, feeding, clothing, welcoming the stranger and eating with outcasts. This is learning that requires doing, which then urges us to learn more about God and how we are to be in the world.

This portion of the texts ends with a blessing:

“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father . . .”

The world in which this text is written was not particularly kind to the early christians, and those gathered in Colossae were likely aware of it. Paul, after all, was likely in prison for his sharing of the Gospel at the time of this writing. Even so, Paul is giving thanks to God for this small gathering of the faithful. So here, the congregation is encouraged and blessed - and maybe even reminded, that our strength to endure is not our own, but comes from God, and that even when our patience is thin, we are to joyfully give thanks to God, for in giving thanks we are made stronger to endure what comes our way.

There is a lot coming our way, in our own lives, in our congregation, in our country, and in the world. And so it has always been with humans. And yet, God remains faithful, even faithful to the point of living in a human body, where he taught us - giving us knowledge of God, healed the sick and ate with outcasts - teaching and demonstrating what it means to do good works and live into hope. And then God remained faithful as Jesus died at the hands of those who were threatened by his teachings and his works, and God remained faithful still, in Jesus' rising from the dead, showing that death and the powers of this world do not have the last word, and that life with God is filled with resurrection hope.

And it is this hope, this love that was freely given for us, that moves us to faith in Christ and love for each other. And that is good news that will bear fruit in the world and in us.

Amen.