

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

The Growing Gospel Seventh Sunday After Pentecost July 11, 2010

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ² To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. ³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. ⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. ⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Today is the first of four Sundays we'll be focusing on Paul's Letter to the Colossians. The Colossians were people who lived in Colosse. It was a small town about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, which was on the coast of the

Mediterranean. Ephesus and Colosse were both in what is now Turkey. Neither of them exists today. Ephesus was the most important city in what the Romans called Asia. Paul lived and taught there for three years (Acts 20:31), which probably gave him time to influence the surrounding areas as well. We don't know if Paul ever visited Colosse himself. But in verses 7 and 8 of today's reading, he reminds the Colossian Christians of how the gospel came to them: **"You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit."**

All this happened a long time ago. Paul wrote Colossians in an ancient language to people who lived two thousand years ago as part of a civilization that is long gone in a city that today is uninhabited countryside. It may seem far removed from our lives and concerns today, but Paul's communication with these folks communicates a freshness and newness that come from God. Because God's grace and love are always new, let's see how these first fourteen verses of Paul's letter can stir us today.

You may have noticed that Paul repeats some words in our reading this morning. The first is **"will"**, as in "the will of God". Paul introduces himself as **"an apostle by the will of God"** in verse 1, and in verse 9 he says he and Timothy are praying that the Lord would fill the Colossians **"with a knowledge of God's will"**. Paul also repeats **"truth"**. In verse 5 he calls the gospel of Jesus that has come to the Colossians **"the word of truth."** In verse 7, he describes how God enabled the Colossians to **"understand God's grace in all its truth"**.

He also uses the phrase **"faith and love"** a couple of times. In verses 3 and 4, Paul tells the Colossians **"we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints"**. In verse 5, he's specific about where they come from: **"the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven."**

And lastly, uses **"growing"** in two different ways. In verse 6, he says it's the gospel itself that has been growing: **"All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it."** But later it's the Colossians who are growing. Paul says his prayers for God to fill them with a knowledge of God's will in verse 9 are so they can be **"growing in the knowledge of God"** in verse 10.

In case you're wondering, I haven't picked these words out because they're what I could put together from some Scrabble letters someone might have left in my desk drawer. These words are all important elements in the story of what's happened to the Colossians. Their story begins with the will of God. All of

us have a will. We have certain things we want to do, certain things we want to happen.

The reason we have a will is that we're created in God's image, and God has a will. He wants certain things to happen. Among those things was that Paul, the persecutor of Christians, would become an apostle, which means "one who is sent" to proclaim the gospel of Christ. The starting place for the Colossians' story and everyone else's is God's will. It's God's will for people everywhere, in every age to hear the wonderful news of God's new ruler over human affairs, over life, and over death. That new ruler is Jesus Christ. That's what "gospel" means. It's the wonderful news of a new ruler, whose reign is going to make a permanent and eternal difference in the whole universe. God's will is to rescue people from the **"dominion of darkness and bring them into the kingdom of the Son he loves."** That's what he's done with Paul and with the Colossians. Put another way, God's will is what God does. God transfers people from darkness to light in Jesus Christ.

Epaphras came to Colosse and announced the wonderful news of the new king Jesus, his death for sins, and his resurrection from the dead. As the people there heard **"the word of truth, the gospel"**, it meshed exactly with their experience. As they heard of the one true and holy God, they realized that all their pagan ways were an affront and a sin against him. They confessed their sins and asked Christ to give them eternal life and his Holy Spirit, and were flooded with the power and life of the living God. They **"understood God's grace in all its truth,"** that is, in reality. God's action in their lives showed them the deep darkness in which they had been living, and God's favor and love for them as he rescued them in Christ. **"You have been rescued from the dominion of darkness"** means **"from the authority of darkness."**

They were freed from the fears of having to appease the many gods under whose unpredictable power they had lived. They knew they were accepted by the one true God because of his Son, Jesus.

It's not just the people in Colosse who were experiencing the life-changing power of **"the word of truth, the gospel"**. Paul had traveled all over the Roman Empire and could say **"All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."** People everywhere were coming to Christ. They are the **"fruit"** the gospel is producing, the fruit with the seeds of the gospel that will rescue more people from the dominion of darkness and transfer them into the Kingdom of Christ.

Epaphras has come from Colosse and told Paul and Timothy about the Colossians' **"faith in Christ Jesus"**. They have believed, and the proof is in what Epaphras has seen and experienced, their **"love for all the saints,"** that is, for all those whom God has made holy through their faith in Christ. Because of their gratitude to God for what he has done for them, the Colossians are demonstrating that love by caring for and serving others near and far, Jews and gentiles.

So Paul and Timothy pray for the Colossians. They pray **"asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding."** They're praying for very specific things. The focus is that the Colossians know God's will. God does not communicate his will through omens and signs or mystical experiences, but through his word, the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit brings the reality of God's will in Scriptures, **"the word of truth, the gospel"** alive in the hearts of those who are seeking to do God's will. God's will is for the Colossians to do for others what Epaphras has done for them: to announce the wonderful news of the new ruler, Jesus, whom the Scriptures have foretold since ancient times. As they do God's will, they will see God at work rescuing people from darkness and transferring them into the kingdom of the Son he loves.

There's a further purpose for praying for the Colossians to do God's will. Paul sets it out in verse 10: **"And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God."** The Lord Jesus has laid his perfect, divine, sinless life down for the Colossians. It follows that they live lives worthy of what he has done for them and seek to please him in every way. And as they do, says Paul, they'll be **"bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God."**

The gospel is growing as more and more people experience the cleansing and freedom of forgiveness of sins through Christ, and the flood of joy as God imparts new life to them in the Holy Spirit. And as these new Christians share this wonderful news with others, they grow. They bear fruit, and they come to know God more and more intimately as the holy one, the only one who rescues them from darkness, the one who cleanses from sin and forgives, who tenderly guides and shepherds his people, who provides and cares for them every day in this life, and for eternity in the next. All this life in Christ is undergirded and accented with thanks and gratitude to the God who has given such riches and beauty and power to those who had no right to expect anything from him but condemnation.

In what Paul says to the Colossians in these first fourteen verses we can see that the same Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and filled Paul when he was transferred from the dominion of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ is at work in them. God's will is what God does, and he has done wonderful things in his life and theirs.

God's will hasn't changed from that day to this. This ancient text is fresh to us this morning because the same Holy Spirit is at work in us. He is here this morning, 2,000 years later, stirring and touching us with the same truth that moved and transformed both the writer and the readers of Colossians so long ago. The gospel is still growing in all the world.

The only difference with us is that we may not see the darkness from which we've been rescued by faith in Christ. We live in an orderly place where for the most part people live by the rules, and pretty much know what to expect from day to day. Though our moral life as a nation has deteriorated seriously over the last forty years or so, we're still far from the widespread chaos and conflict and danger and abuse that much of the world has lived in throughout history and still experiences today.

Our darkness takes more subtle forms like helping people for our own advantage rather than their benefit, or favoring those who favor us, or avoiding our legitimate responsibilities in any of a hundred different ways. But the darkness that causes you to fall off a cliff in the middle of the night is the same darkness that makes you stub your toe. The difference in the damage done is only a matter of degree. Darkness is still darkness.

It's God's will for people everywhere, in every age to hear the wonderful news of God's new ruler over human affairs, over life, and over death. God's will at all times and in all places is for his growing gospel to continue to grow throughout the world. He wants the **“word of truth, the gospel”** to come to people. He wants to rescue people from the dominion of darkness and transfer them into the kingdom of his Son, whom he loves, and in whom we have been bought back—that's what “redemption” means.

People who know they've been rescued are provoked into helping to rescue those who are still in danger. You can't stop them. The gospel grows in them, increasing their faith in Christ Jesus and their love for both those who need to know him and those who do. They come to know God's will by doing God's will, and they come to know God as he does things, the things he wills, through them.

Like the Colossians, we have been rescued from the authority of darkness. God's will is to use us as he rescues others, those who are like us, and

those who aren't, those who are near, and those who are not. As those who have been rescued by this growing gospel, can we ignore what our rescuer wants us to do? God has a clear purpose and mission for St. Matthew's. Please continue to pray for the Mission Task Group as they struggle with the specifics of that mission so we can join in the joyful growth of the gospel and our knowledge and love of God.

Let us pray.