

The passage from the Word of God today is from Colossians 4:7-18.

Tychicus, a dear brother, faithful minister, and fellow slave⁸ in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me.⁹ I sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are doing¹⁰ and that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹ I sent him¹¹ with Onesimus, the faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.¹² They will tell¹³ you about everything here. ¹⁰ Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him). ¹¹ And Jesus who is called Justus also sends greetings. In terms of Jewish converts,¹⁴ these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you and a slave¹⁵ of Christ,¹⁶ greets you. He is always struggling in prayer on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured¹⁷ in all the will of God. ¹³ For I can testify that he has worked hard¹⁸ for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Our dear friend Luke the physician and Demas greet you. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters¹⁹ who are in Laodicea and to Nympha and the church that meets in her²⁰ house.²¹ ¹⁶ And after²² you have read this letter, have it read²³ to the church of Laodicea. In turn, read the letter from Laodicea²⁴ as well. ¹⁷ And tell Archippus, "See to it that you complete the ministry you received in the Lord." ¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting by my own hand.²⁵ Remember my chains.²⁶ Grace be with you.²⁷ (Col. 4:1 NET)

Paul has written of the glory of Christ Jesus, of the sufficiency of His person and work on our behalf for all which is required to obtain for us a belonging with God and an inclusion in His graces, and has labored hard to explain the doctrines of the gospel, of the supremacy of Jesus, and given us the implications of it for life, ethics, and morally appropriate responses in our relationships, both familial and social.

In the conclusion, however, you get an idea of Paul's heart; that he delights not only to share in his ministry, but to honor those who share in it. In fact, such greetings and affirmations are to be considered acts of worship to the Lord because such greetings and the mutual interdependency which they express are themselves challenges to the myths of self-sufficiency and affirmations of the lack of self-sufficiency that is affirmed in our horizontal relationships.

In our time, particularly under the great societal upheaval due to the spread of a novel viral pandemic, this reality-check upon our sense of self-sufficiency,

personal autonomy, and even presumed immortality, feels abrupt and, in a word which I have heard or read often lately, “surreal.” This is an interesting word that is being used. The word was actually coined from the artistic movement of surrealism, that mix of fantasy or dreamlike expression, irrational and out-of-touch with reality, bending the Real, stretching the True, using such visual and literary work to express the questioning of reality. But this *dependence* which always exists in us, this *fragility* which is so intensely felt in this present context, this *neediness*, is not surreal at all, but more real than the illusion which we typically live under: the illusion of control, the illusion of autonomy, the illusion that are invincible and that tomorrow is promised to us.

And, even in these seemingly inconsequential endings to the letters of the New Testament, there is expressed this very foundation of reality, this root of worship which anchors our fragile souls in the reality that we are not God, that we are needy, and flimsy, and reliant creatures, for Paul states very clearly that he is not autonomous, not only of God, but of other humans, of other helpers.

Such mutually honoring greetings are themselves humbling declarations of this truth, that we are not the determiners of truth or originators of the good, but that only God alone is so worthy of such appellations and adoration for his infinite being and goodness. He alone lacks nothing and we are created dependent from day one and will always be so.

James Smith, in his wonderful book *Desiring the Kingdom*, writes about the nature of mutual interdependency as one of the roots of a proper position towards worship as those created by God. He writes,

“It is not only sin that makes us dependent upon others; our very finitude, as creatures, impels us to relationality because we need the gifts, talents, and resources of others. And such dependence is part of the very fiber of Gods’ good creation. Worship is a space of welcome because we are, at

root, relational creatures called into relationship with the Creator, in order to flourish as a people who bear his image to and for the world.” (p169)

This mutual interdependence, then, is not merely because of sinfulness, but because of weakness. We are built with incapability. We are not built to be self-autonomous, which is the very antithesis of worship, but to be dependent; primarily upon God, but also upon one another. Adam was not created to stand alone, but it was pronounced by God that his aloneness was “not good” and that he must have a helper. It is the Eden way. It should be the Eugene way. We need others in this life, not only because of our sinful bent, but even as those redeemed, because of our created nature.

What Paul does is equalize the honor of serving Christ by subtly abolishing former divisions and insurrectionally obliterating any assumption that he is preeminent or more necessary than another because of something inherent within him, either genetics, graces, or gifting. Rich noted last week the issue of John Mark, abolishing the division of a former betrayal. Here he also mentions a group of his native kinsmen, Jewish men, and the rest who are presumably Gentiles, reemphasizing that doctrinal truth the gospel of Jesus Christ creates one new humanity, “where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised” from chapter 3, verse 11. The fellow servants and co-workers for the Lord and His Kingdom points to the unity of believers from every ethnic background as they serve the one Lord over all.

Paul also then relates these fellows to their corresponding communities and those corresponding communities to others, including the apostolic authorities, when he identifies some as “who is one of you” in verse 9 and “who comes from you” in verse 12. The relationship between the communities of Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea are also noted. The exchange of letters between them all as having something of note for all equally notes the unity and interdependence of all who are in Christ is both emphasized and demonstrated in these final greetings.

You see, through these honoring titles and descriptions, the apostle refused to be considered as the sole apostle of Christ Jesus, or even the primary apostle of the gospel. The gospel does not depend upon Him and the regeneration, redemption, and renewal of the saved does not require him or his presence. It is in view of the gospel itself, of the work of Jesus Christ Himself as ordained and appointed by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that every person listed in this closing greeting is related. It is because of Christ Jesus and His gospel, the same for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, powerful and oppressed, that such messengers and servants are sent and serve. Thus, in the sharing of such honor, he exemplifies in closing greetings, that very principle by which he began the letter, that “the word of truth, the gospel...has been bearing fruit and growing among you since the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth.” (1:5-6) That which was not preach to them by Paul, but by Epaphras, he fully expects to continue to empower the believers as they continue to grow in Christ Jesus. And to these others Paul extends the honor of serving the Lord and His message of hope. He is, by sheer example of gratitude and honoring others, exemplifying that root of biblical worship, dependence and humility.

It is one thing to share suffering, or to be grateful for those who share in our sufferings, but it is a different thing altogether to share in the honor and privilege of gospel work and ministry. Paul was honored for his labors, the churches were grateful to the Lord for him, and he takes great pains in his letters to make sure that others are honored and that the gratitude expressed to the Lord for his gospel ministry is shared also with others to whom he perceives to have equal part in, both in suffering and in celebration.

One of the things that we see in this passage is what godly leadership looks like, particularly leadership for the kingdom of God. The apostle delights not only to share in his ministry, but he seems to actively look to encourage others in it, even those with varying degrees of capabilities and even faithfulness. He brings others

into his circle and lets them use their gifts, and even gets burned for it when they abandon him. Now, regarding John Mark, I think that it is safe to say that Paul has changed in this. He didn't begin this way, in other words. In the crucible of missional labors, constant fears and threats and difficulties, Paul got frustrated with John Mark's fears. When Mark wanted to return home, overwhelmed by the trials and difficulties of cross-cultural traveling and having to assist with the daily needs of Paul and Barnabas, often on a whim or change of circumstance, he gave up. He wanted to go home. Now, before you look down on Mark, consider what he was doing. It was his job to find housing, food, opportunities for Paul and Barnabas wherever they travelled. Crossing cultures, languages, expectations, the political climate and the anti-Semitism that was prevalent, this young man was responsible for making it all work. I think it is fair to think of him as that frazzled assistant of the Type-A leader who is constantly having to find dinner, get coffee, set up appointments, make sure housing is sufficient, get the shoes fixed, find the parchments, answer questions brought to him by things which Paul and Barnabas had said, and so on. Add to this language differences and cultural differences in places and towns and roads and ships which he was unfamiliar with and you may be able to empathize with how he may have faltered in the task.

It is a reasonable conclusion that Paul had since grown in his understanding of applied grace towards others here. What was once such frustration that he stopped working with the very competent Barnabas, we see now the heart that values patience and grace and the restoration of a man given a second chance to serve in more stressful times. For, he not only receives John Mark back and honors him, but we see another man mentioned here, still in good standing at the time, named Demas, who would within a short time, desert Paul in prison because "he has loved this present age." In other words, Demas loved this present *evil* age, the set of values opposed to the coming age, the age of redemption where Christ rules in holiness. Demas stopped helping Paul because

he stopped entrusting himself to Jesus and His kingdom, something very different in nature than John Mark's failure. Yet, even when Paul does eventually mention Demas' fall, he does so with sorrow and simplicity, without railing bitterness or contempt.

You see, Demas' abandonment would not have been totally out-of-the-blue. One's desires and longings cannot be completely hidden from those close to them, recognized by those feelings that something is off and not quite right. Paul must have known Demas' weaknesses and struggles, to some degree, though he may have been surprised at their depth or their strength in his soul. Even knowing this, however, he seeks to include him while he was still involved. He mentions him along with Luke, the gospel writer and physician. This simply shows that Paul is willing to take risks on weaker comrades, those who want to help, but whose motives or commitment is somewhat questionable. Though weak faith is present, such weakness does not require, or even give quarter to, ostracizing or disdainful behavior. In fact, Paul mentions him here, giving him honor in the eyes of the Colossians, instead. Not because he is strong, but because he is there. This is an incredibly humble act of grace, from one, Paul, who knows that he is not united to Christ because he is strong, but because Christ is strong, and all he has to do is hold on to Jesus and nothing else secures him in the blessing and the belonging of God.

This characteristic of the apostle's leadership is easy to overlook in the light of how much respect or admiration that Paul, himself, has received throughout the age of the church. Yet, how often do we connect Paul with these co-workers in our mind? Do we not, in ignorance of his own views, simply see him as the uniquely gifted monolith of gospel ministry, assuming that he did his own thing on his own and without mutually interdependent gifts and personalities of others? That does not seem to be the actual case, and surely was not from his own point of view something to be taken with an iota of veracity at all.

Now, since such an assumption, that Paul is the sole necessary servant of the gospel, does not come from Paul himself, or from any other Scripture, then I reckon that it comes from the simply cursed assumption that exists in my heart: that I am the sole necessary component of the world in which I live. That's rather strong, but consider how we sign off on our letters. Do you sound like this man? I surely don't. Do you go on and on about the honor and service of others on the behalf of your addressee? I now that I don't. I spend more time trying to pick a single word or phrase for my complimentary close. Do I use "sincerely"? No, that sounds so...insincere. Do I use, "Blessings?" No, that's too trendy. Do I use, "cordially" or "respectfully yours" or "warmly"? No, those are just trying too hard. How about something really theologically impressive, "Your affectionate pastor, being regenerated by the Spirit and appointed in due course by Him from whom all blessings are conveyed through Triune glory, with conviction regarding the vicarious atonement of His divine Son, most blessed one, and the monergistic works of His divine grace in our redemption, as witnessed in the Holy Scriptures by which we who have been predestined by sovereign grace have believed upon the name of Jesus, our Lord," Yeah, I'm going to start going with that. No pretentiousness there, right?

Rather, what we see, instead, is utterly simple and entirely benevolent in honor. He honors others and simply ends with, remember my chains. That, my friends, is genuine humility. That is mutual dependence and mutually honoring love. It is so reliant upon Jesus alone as his righteousness and as the securer of all the honor that he needs, that it does not even attempt to get us to look at himself, but only to the service and sacrifice of others, stopping only at the end to express his need, not his greatness. Oh! How convicting! And you thought that these closing comments were boring! Let them speak and be heard, and let our hearts be silent and be mastered by them.

For Christ Jesus has put you and I into a community of neediness and of dependency, where each part of His body, united to Him alone, serves a part and a purpose of equal necessity and therefore of equal honor. The hand cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you” or the eye say to the mouth, “I don’t need you”. We are all dependent upon Christ Jesus the same, and we are all dependent upon one another to carry out His purposes in this world, that we might honor and glorify Him, the Head of His body, from whom all blessings and glory flows.

This visual symbol, of the body, is the image that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. It is this divinely designed body which Paul uses to show how dramatically different the Church is, in its very nature, than any other institution or group. **You have been made one.** This oneness of the church is far deeper than the oneness of college alumni, citizens of a country, or even members of a family. There is an intense, indivisible connection between Christ and His people, and between every member of His people, just as there is an intense, indivisible connection between the head of the body and the hand, the head and the foot, etc. Our life, and thus our living, is divinely ordained to be connected not only to God, but also to one another in the Body of Christ. Oneness implies a far deeper reality than merely attending services on a Sunday, or occasionally attending a small group Bible study. This is why this temporary absence from one another’s presence is not a devastating destruction of our unity, nor is it no big deal, as if such time together were inconsequential. It lies in-between these two poles. For, because we are one in this way, when we are parted from one another we still belong to one another, and yet we also do appreciate the modern construct that technological means of communication, such as this recording, or blogs or vlogs or livestreams, can replace the necessity of seeing one another face to face, of physical touch, of being in one another’s presence. We long to return to that, just like Paul himself noted in his letter to the Thessalonians, that when Timothy had brought news of their faith and love and how much they remembered them kindly and longed to see them, “as we long to see you,” he

said. Though there is a necessary departure, those who are united to Christ Jesus are united to one another, and there is the appropriate longing to see one another and be with one another that a livestream or recording cannot replace, nor ever will. What separation is, is necessary for such a time, but it is right to lament it, and to long for the return to the gathering.

For, in Christ Jesus, we are knit together by more than social contract or even genetic code. We are one body, bound by mutual ligaments of grace, the lifeblood of the same Spirit of God flowing through us all, nourishing and cleansing and strengthening each one, in whatever ways God has gifted us. For, we are not all the same, but have distinctions in our works of service which God has assigned to each one as He sees fit. Some speak well, some craft utensils or art, some share their homes or cooking skills, some weep alongside others, but all play a part in the great mission of the church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the gospel to the glory of God. But we are all one body. This does not change with the circumstances that we are under. We still ought to be using our gifts to glorify God.

Look at the words the apostle uses in 1 Corinthians 12:13 to declare the unity which we all have, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and were all given one Spirit to drink”.: *Baptized and Watered*.

Baptized. All have been baptized into one body. That is, we have all been immersed into one body by the Spirit of God, identified now with the entire Body of Christ. When you believed in Christ Jesus, you were baptized into Him, and were identified with His death and resurrection. But, Paul tells us through the Spirit that you were not only baptized into Christ Jesus, but you were baptized into His Body! You were also identified with His people, the redeemed and chosen. Thus, your foundational identification is no longer your physical surname (Roberts, in my case), nor your physical citizenship (American), in spite of how hearing

about such things moment-by-moment on the news may make it feel, but rather you are foundationally, eternally, deep-at-the-root-of-who-you-are *Christian*. We endure this pandemic and all the accompanying economic instability and social distancing, not as primarily Americans or Eugenians or Oregonians, but as Christians in the Kingdom of God and living for the Kingdom of God.

And, your identity as Christian is not merely individual, but communal. You are baptized into one body of many members. This is who you are: one Body together. This is not achieved by us or attained by us through some subset of laws which one Christian might attain and another might not. No! The Spirit of God baptizes us all into this one new humanity, this new people, by His sovereign grace. In this body, race doesn't privilege, economic power doesn't privilege, social status doesn't privilege, gender doesn't privilege, health doesn't privilege. ALL were equally destitute in our sin and required the exact same repentance, no matter how noble or ignoble your former way of life, and the same faith in the same Christ on the same Cross. ALL who come to Christ Jesus by faith, receiving Him as Lord over them, were brought into this body and equally held in this body by the same divine purpose and power. You were brought in by God, all of you who belong to Christ Jesus by faith, for salvation belongs to the LORD.

You have all been *Watered*. The ESV has "made to drink of one Spirit", but I think that in our vernacular that misses the point. The point of the Greek word is to be watered, the giving and sustaining of life by the presence of life-giving water. So it is used in Genesis 2:6 of the mist which watered the ground and gave life to the plants which God created. So it also used in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians regarding the proclamation of the gospel: one plants the seed, another waters, but God causes the growth. It is the seed and the water which bring life by the power of God. Thus, to "drink", in this sense, is be given life, the flourishing of the life consistent with the content of the drink. With what are we all watered? The Spirit of God! Therefore, everyone who is in Christ has not only

been brought in, baptized, by the Spirit of God into one body, but also given the same life, enriched by the same Spirit, sustained and growing from the same Spirit of God. There are not spiritual Christians and carnal Christians. All are watered by the same Spirit of God! By nature we are now one with one another, under Christ, and we live according to the same source, the Spirit of God who works all things according to the counsel of His own will.

And this Spirit is not bound by a building or a temple or a single gathering. He blows wherever He wishes and enables His people to worship Him wherever we might be, empowers our prayers to rise up to the throne room of God like sweet-smelling incense in their dependence, and holds us together when we feel so utterly alone.

Continuing the analogy to the Corinthians in his first letter, chapter 12, verse 12, the apostle Paul explains through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the glorious truth of what it means to be in Christ is to *belong* to Him and to one another. The Church is not an event that you attend, it is what you are a part of, a member of, an indivisibly connected body part through which the lifeblood of God's Spirit flows in grace upon grace for the mutual flourishing of the entire body. **You belong to one another.**

There is a great need for belonging. God created us to belong to one another, and but for the corruption of sin, our belonging would be unquestioned and unharmed. It is sin which has broken our belonging, bringing in its stead alienation and betrayal, the common human frustration of being cast out because sin is a common human experience. But, in the Church God is redeeming and reconciling these alienations and frustrations by uniting us all into one body by the same Spirit through one powerful means, the Cross of Christ Jesus, with one sovereign Head, Jesus. He rules us all with sovereign love and holiness. When you belong to Christ Jesus by faith in Him, you belong in His people.

So, if you are in Christ, having repented of your sins and depended upon Christ Jesus to rescue and rule you, then you belong here. You have a right to be here. You have the obligation to be here. Simply because you are not serving like another does not imply that you do not belong, or that you belong in a lesser sense, or that you are right to minimize your commitment or participation in the life and ministry of the Body. Hence, the analogy: Simply because you might say, “I am not a hand” does not imply that you don’t belong to the body, does it? Is the foot a part of the one body even though it is not a hand? Of course! The enemy may tempt you to disbelieve this, but you belong. And not only do you belong, but you belong to one another. What does this mean, to belong?

Well, let us follow the apostle’s reasoning. **Belonging means that you are necessary.** You belong and you are necessary in whatever works of service you may bring by the Spirit of God. If we only had preachers, how would we express mercy to one another? Who would show hospitality? Who would craft the beautiful things which express the grandeur and glory of God? If we only had healers, who would declare the truths to our sorrowed hearts? Who would proclaim the gospel verbally? Thus, Paul uses the analogy of the Body: if we were all eyes, how would we hear? All ears, how would we smell? In other words, you and your committed work, as one who belongs to the body, is necessary for the health of the body and the glorification of Christ together with all the saints. Your work is necessary for the preaching of the gospel. You may not be gifted to preach, but you may be gifted to cook. How can you use your cooking gift to further the proclamation of the gospel? Maybe your cooking provides mercy to the hungry while those verbally gifted share the gospel. Not every gift is verbal, but every gift can support the work together. Do you love numbers and accounting? How can your accounting skills help build the kingdom? We all play a part which is necessary for the entire mission to proceed. No military mission is all infantry, or all cavalry, or all air power. It

takes every division operating together to fulfill the mission, and so it is with the life-giving ministry of the gospel among us and by us to the glory of Christ.

And it is God who has arranged every part to function in the manner which He has deemed fit for the benefit of the entire Body, the mutual accomplishing of the purpose of the Head, and the glorification of Christ Jesus. God has included you and gifted you for the ministry of the Body of Christ and the mission of Jesus. You are connected and empowered, so how shall you now serve? You are necessary. The Church needs you to fulfill its mission because God has redeemed you and graced you to serve one another so that we can fulfill our mutual task of proclaiming that Jesus is Lord over all. What part shall you play in this great goal?

Finally, **belonging means that you are honored**, no matter how “visible” your works of service. Paul goes to great lengths to counteract the power-appropriating attitudes that are often present in our social circles. That attitude that magnifies the honor and significance of certain gifts, usually the most visible gifts like preaching, teaching, healing, and tongues, over and above the other “less public and ‘powerful’” gifts. The fact that it is God who has assigned each member to his/her place, and it is God who empowers each grace for every member for the flourishing of the whole body, indicates that each member and each corresponding grace of God for the work of ministry is equally honorable.

One of the things which harms the church and which militates against the Church is the great individualism which we find both in our culture and therefore in our own assumptions and values. We think in starkly individualistic terms, making the concept of belonging, of obligations to one another, of dependence upon one another, of mutuality itself very, very hard to conceive.

One of the cultural idols of our day is the approval of man. We feel the need to be recognized, lauded, appreciated, approved by other people. When we are not appreciated, or do not feel respected, we feel the need to demand it, to

defend it, to seize it by force. However, the gospel of our union with Christ, expressed so eloquently and powerfully and clearly in the earlier part of Colossians, means that our honor is not tied to man's approval, or even in whether or not people even see us, but rather in God's sovereign work of binding us to Jesus by faith alone. Also, it is He who assigns each one his work in the times which He has ordained, whether visible or hidden, and it is He who approves and delights and rejoices and recognizes when one's work is done. In fact, He delights in it. He rejoices in those things which nobody else cherishes, those acts of mercy to the powerless grieving soul, those extra minutes with a child who needs help doing childish things in a childish way, those patient tongue-holding prayers with a difficult neighbor, or those hard gentle words of rebuke to a wayward brother. These works, and these gifts, are not less honorable because they are less visible or less seen by man. They, too, are necessary for the flourishing of the Body of Christ and the glory of Christ Jesus. They delight God because He placed them there, and placed you there. In fact, Paul says, isn't it the most important parts of the body that we cover up so as not to see? Honor and visibility, significance and sight, glory and gaudy, are not the same things. Our honor is tied to God's delight, and He has gifted you and appropriated each member of His body right where He wants it and empowered it to do His work for His glory. Honor one another in every place, especially in the day of great need, such as today.

In this day of trial, of frustration, of fear, or even if you doubt that this social distancing is unnecessary, there are those who are desperately needy. How are you going to walk in love? How are you, who have been united to the Resurrection and the Life, going to walk fearlessly and fruitfully in a world whose hope is desperately threatened today and show them that "Jesus is Lord" in the ways which God has gifted you and appointed you right now? How shall you honor those who are laboring for the sake of others? Like Paul's complimentary

closing, you see them. You recognize them. You praise their work. You share your life. You get in beside them and serve one another.

So, while we cannot join together as a whole for the present time, take this opportunity to step beside another and serve them in our time of mutual need, using what gifts that God has given to you, knowing that you are safe and secure from all alarm because you belong to God through Christ Jesus, the Resurrection and the life.