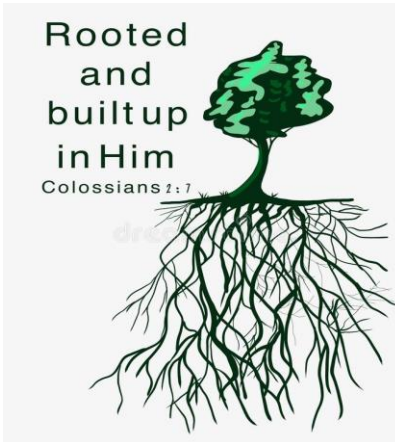


Sermon – July 24, 2022  
“Fullness in Christ”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Colossians 2:6-15

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill those gathered here with open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here right now. Amen*

Good morning! I hope and pray that all are well and enjoying the hot days of summer. How are we doing as we seek to be those listening for Holy Spirit to speak? Does anyone have a word or other gifts they have received from Holy Spirit they would risk sharing this morning? Let me encourage us to continue to pray the short prayers found in the bulletin and then spend a few minutes listening for Holy Spirit's guidance in our lives. Let me also encourage us to use the prayer from Paul's letter to the Colossians also found on the back of the bulletin as we lift up each other in prayer. We are continuing to discern God's will for our congregations through weekly prayer and other opportunities to learn about the state and future of the United Methodist Church, new Wesleyan denominations, and the challenges, opportunities and tensions currently surfacing in the greater UMC. Come and join us this evening at 6 p.m. at Fairfields as we learn, listen to each other, and pray with each other, seeking to discern the voice of the Good Shepherd as we stand together at this fork in the life and journey of our church. Over the last few weeks,

both churches in the Charge have sent out letters to advise and invite all active members into this process. Please pray for each other as we journey forward in Christ together.

As we heard the Scripture read this morning, we might have realized we are still hearing words Paul shared with the church in Colossae. The Colossians have been struggling with new teaching that is being shared with them and Paul has written to encourage and instruct them. We don't have a copy of the letter from Colossae to Paul to help us understand the teaching Paul is concerned about, so we must try to understand from Paul's letter what the issues in Colossae might have been. Notice that the first thing Paul does is remind the Colossians they have received Christ Jesus as Lord. We also, as believers in Jesus, have this common bond. Paul tells them to be rooted and built up in Jesus and to be established in faith. The idea of being rooted might be Paul's reference to the prophet Jeremiah's words that speak to trusting in the Lord. Hear these words from Jeremiah 17:7-8, page 719 in the pew Bibles. "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." These words paint a powerful picture of what we are to be like as we sink our own roots of faith deep into the living water that Jesus provides to those who believe in him. We are to be those who do not fear the heat of the summer and lack of rain. We are to be those who continue to bear fruit even when we are surrounded by difficult times and events.

The Colossians have been given the apostolic teaching about Jesus and they are rooted in that teaching. Their response, and our own, is to abound or overflow with thanksgiving. The Colossians have the message of the Gospel. They know Jesus died for their sins, was raised by God, and has ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God. They also have received Holy Spirit, are filled with the Spirit, and are seeking to be guided by the Spirit. But there are some issues as new teaching has come to them, teaching that seems to advocate keeping the whole Law and may add other aspects that were not part of the apostolic teaching given to them through Epaphras from Paul. Paul encourages them to abound in thanksgiving. We also as believers are to have this same response. When we think about the Gospel and the gift of eternal life we have been given in Christ, we also should be those who abound in thanksgiving. When we receive teaching from God's Word, we also should be filled with thanksgiving. Whenever we gather together to study God's Word and our time of study ends, we should share our thanks for

the teaching about Jesus we have received. We are able to read God's Word and when we do, we are to approach it with trembling, but our response to what we learn as we read is thanksgiving. We are to be those who are giving thanks and praise as we encounter Jesus through the Scripture. Our closing hymn is a place in our worship where we are to respond with thanksgiving. We express thanksgiving by joining our voices in a time of praise as we sing hymns to God together. The idea of vibrant worship is us being swept up into times of thanksgiving for the gift we receive as we come before God in this place and are filled again with the Spirit. The ancient response of "Come, Lord Jesus, come" should be in our hearts and minds as we respond to the sharing of the Word.

Paul cautions the Colossians about some pitfalls they must avoid in order for them to remain in Christ. First, they are not to allow anyone to take them captive through philosophy. Ambrose Bierce once gave a definition of philosophy that I like. He defined philosophy as "a route of many roads leading from nowhere to nothing." And there are jokes about philosophy, such as "philosophy turns solutions into problems and the simplest things into the most unintelligible".<sup>1</sup> I did not study philosophy until I went to seminary, and there I took a required class in philosophy. While I found the class helpful, the philosophy we read did seem to have some circular thought, most likely because I frequently was lost trying to follow the discussions on philosophies. Philosophy today is not quite the same as it was for the Colossians. They considered anything that talked about God as philosophy. Paul is not anti-philosophy, but is against anything that does not have Jesus as its focus or endpoint. For Paul, if a philosophy did not have Jesus as its focus, it would be empty. Today, much of the philosophy we encounter has moved beyond Jesus and as such is empty teaching; it leads nowhere.

Another trap Paul identifies is human tradition. For a Jew, tradition was accumulated understanding about the Law and how to live in accordance with the Law. These traditions were the oral instructions that were passed down through the ages and were eventually written down. For a Jew, tradition was a good thing. Jewish traditions were related to the ancient words of God they had been given; the old was good, proven, and wise. Today, new is good and the old is too often set aside. We think we know better today. The techniques of science cross over into our lives and leave us always seeking the new. Often science proves itself wrong as it learns more about the intricate details of God's creation, a creation God already knows but science continues to discover. When we speak of the tradition of the Church, we speak to that which all believers

have believed for all time. Contrast that understanding of tradition with the modern approach that sets aside God's Word and replaces it with the world's latest ideas. The issue Paul is pointing out to the Colossians, and therefore to us, is that of human tradition. Paul wants us to avoid becoming captive to human tradition but to hold fast to the tradition created by the Lord Jesus, the one who redeems. As we look at Paul's guidance in the context of our own time, we want to be sure that we do not become captive to traditions that are of the world, but hold to those that are from Jesus.

Paul reminds the Colossians that in Jesus dwells bodily the whole fullness of deity. Jesus and the Father are one. As believers, we have Jesus dwelling in us through Holy Spirit, and as such we also are connected to the fullness of God in the person of Jesus. When we pray in Jesus' name, we are not praying to a weak distant God, but to a God who is fully present, fully able, and willing to act on our behalf.

A male Jew's identity was connected to the removal of a small piece of flesh from his body. This ritual separated Jewish men from all other people. To become a Jew, a man had to submit to this ritual, and this may be part of what is being taught among the Colossians. Notice how Paul moves this idea of circumcision from a Jewish ritual to Jesus, telling the Colossians they have experienced a spiritual circumcision. We might ask, "What is this spiritual circumcision Paul writes about?" Paul connects spiritual circumcision to our baptism, noting that when we go into the water we are buried with Christ and we were also raised from the dead by God with Jesus. We share in the resurrection of Jesus and are connected through Jesus to God's resurrection power. Now in case we get the impression that in baptism we are suddenly cleansed of all of the sin that clings to us, we would be wise to recall the words of one Bishop Bergray of Norway who said, "In baptism we take the old man and put him under. But the old man can sure swim." Our old self also is able to swim well, but the point Paul is making is that the death sentence for our old self has come, and as we come up from the waters of baptism, the seeds of transformation are planted and begin to grow. <sup>ii</sup>

Paul tells the Colossians that the record of our sin is known to God. It is written down. This record testifies against us and has legal requirements under the Law, requirements that Paul describes as our debt to God. This is a debt that we cannot pay. All that we have is from God and so we have nothing with which we can repay our debt. Our situation is critical and eternal death is our future. But Paul says that God made us alive together with Jesus when he forgave us all

our trespasses. And notice the word here is not you but us. Paul is now speaking to both Jews and Gentiles, the circumcised and uncircumcised. Both are forgiven all of their trespasses in Jesus. The record that was in place that testifies against us had been erased, and with its removal, all of the legal requirements for our eternal death are removed. Jesus did this by taking our record of sin and nailing it with his body to the cross and erasing it with his blood shed on the cross. This is the idea of atonement. Jesus has fully paid the debt we owe God for our sins and with his payment, our legal requirements are satisfied. Salvation is complete. There is nothing else we need to add to secure salvation, to be reconciled to God. Jesus fully paid the price.

Paul makes one final point about the cross and what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus was placed on the cross by and before the rulers and authorities. As he hung there, they looked on, thinking they had won. They thought Jesus was defeated, that Jesus died, and that they would not have to deal with him again. Jesus stayed on the cross enduring their taunts and cries of victory. Jesus, who is the greatest love ever witnessed, the love of God for His people in flesh, stayed on the cross and bore the guilt and punishment for the sin of all of humanity, past, present, and future. The rulers and authorities looked at him and watched him die and thought they had won, but three days later, there was an empty tomb and Jesus was raised from the dead. In Jesus' death the authorities and rulers were all defeated. Jesus turns their victory into a victory for us all. Simply stated, Jesus triumphs over them. Not just those who looked on, but all of the evil spiritual powers that worked through those authorities and rulers or any authority and ruler. All authorities and rulers in heaven and on earth have been defeated. Jesus' triumph over them is complete.

Our response to Jesus' victory is at least two-fold. First, we are to abound in thanksgiving. And second, we are to be those who are deeply rooted in Christ. To develop these roots, we are to be like John Wesley and be a people of one book, the Holy Bible. We are to be those who read God's Word with trembling and yet give thanks as we grow in faith and knowledge of Jesus. When we come here each week, we should come as those striving to respond with abounding thanksgiving to the love of Christ. We come as those who need the fellowship of a loving Christian community, who are praying for one another and seeking to build each other up, and who are so filled with thanksgiving for what God has done for us through his son Jesus that we abound in sharing our thanks. Come on the Sabbath with our hearts filled with thanksgiving and join with brothers and sisters in Christ to grow roots of faith as we

learn about Jesus, and then sing with great thanksgiving in our hearts the hymns lifting up praises to King Jesus.

*Pray with me: Lord, we come together this day in Christian fellowship to join with our sisters and brothers in Christ to give thanks for the victory you won over all rulers and authorities. Lord, give us hearts of praise and unending joy as we join together to worship you this day and every day. We pray this morning and always in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

#### PRAYER TO HOLY SPIRIT

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.

Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.

Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy.

Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.

Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may

*Saint Augustine (A.D. 354-430)*

---

<sup>i</sup> Garland, David E.. Colossians, Philemon (The NIV Application Commentary Book 12) (p. 158). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Garland, David E.. Colossians, Philemon (The NIV Application Commentary Book 12) (p. 168). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition