



Roanoke, Virginia
All Saints Sunday
November 4, 2018

“Machiavelli Was Wrong”

Colossians 1:1-14
George C. Anderson

In a bit, I will read the opening of Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, a church he did not establish and never visited, but which he knows of through reports from a fellow evangelist named Epaphras. What he has learned from these reports has both discouraged and encouraged him. What discouraged him is what he has heard about some of the church’s teachers. He hears they are encouraging Colossian Christians to find God less in Jesus and more within Greek culture. They encourage spiritual fads which are not consistent with each other except they all are popular among the Greeks: astrology (which is about superstition and magic), philosophy (which is about logic and theory) and a body shaming way of life. They encourage what today might sound like *Fit Bit Ethics*: fasting, dieting and abstinence from anything seen as self-indulgent. Except what they promote is more about body shaming than body shaping; more self-abuse than self-care.

They are embarrassed, you see, about the body, about anything of the world that will decay, about having to live in history; anything that is particular, messy, fleshy and flawed. How better it would be in their eyes to move Christians away from a Jesus of history to a Jesus of the Cosmos who can be adapted to personal tastes and current trends.

Paul is discouraged because what makes the Christian faith so transformative is that God reaches us in Christ in the lives we live. Faith has everything to do with living with dignity within history where forces like greed, power and selfishness are trying to have their way.

Maybe what discouraged Paul is why he wrote his epistle and is relevant today, but what encouraged him is also relevant. And because this is All Saints Sunday, I want to focus upon the overall tone of the letter which is one of Thanksgiving. Paul writes not only because he is discouraged by bad teaching that leads to body shaming and disengagement from the world, but he



is encouraged by, and wants to praise those who have in some ways reflected in their fleshy, imperfect lives the shining light of Jesus; the light of God's transforming power of love.

So, listen to the reading of the opening letter of the Colossian epistle, and listen for the deep gratitude Paul has for those who have gone before; those whose faith is reflected in the faith and witness of the Colossian church's most mature members.

Colossians 1:1-14:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,²To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶that 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. ⁷This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, ⁸and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹For 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, ¹⁰so 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. ¹¹May 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 ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

It isn't news to most of you that I love babies. Rachel and Elizabeth would add that I'm not the only pastor around this place who loves babies. Our hearts are easily captured by these small and brand-new persons who, simply because they exist, are children of God, worthy of care and love. We are fortunate to be ordained ministers within a faith tradition that, like Judaism, is so child-oriented. Judaism and Christianity are child-oriented religions because they are ancestor-oriented religions.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to children.

It is hard for us today to realize what a radical development it was when Judaism emerged as a child-oriented religion. Children of Canaan were seen and treated as property of their fathers and their tribes. Though very much a patriarchal culture, Judaism emerged with this idea that all children have inherent worth as children of God... so much so that even orphans who "belonged" to no one should be cared for by everyone in the tribe.

Christians inherited that bias: "Let the children come unto me, for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven." In speaking to the importance of children, it is not enough to say what we so often say after Preschool, Confirmation, and Youth Sundays; that children and youth are our



future. That is true, but the future of what? Carrying on the family name? That is not enough in our faith. The future of a community or nation? The future of the human species? No, not enough. There are within some families, communities and within the human species itself traditions of dysfunction, abuse, and manipulations; abuses of power and greed.

No, within the Jewish faith, children are the future as they become inheritors of traditions of the Torah that promote justice, righteousness and peace. Children are the future of the Christian faith as they become inheritors of the Gospel; which locates God's justice, righteousness and peace within the lived and resurrected life of Jesus. Our faiths are not the pristine philosophies that the false teachers of Colossae would like. Within history and personal experience; within the faith community and within community outside the lines of faith; through sorrow and joy, gain and loss, sins committed, and mercy and grace embraced; we have learned important things about what it means to love God, the world, others (even our enemies) and ourselves. We have to teach these things to our children, Deuteronomy says- Paul says- because without passing on these traditions to the next generation, faith will lose its way. Faith will become coopted by false teachers who inevitably will guide the church to false gods and their fads that inevitably serve causes other than dignity and compassion. Simply put, for faiths that embrace history and experience, lessons are lost if they are not passed on.

And so, Jews and Christians both embrace and teach children as a way to honor the legacy of the faithful who have lived and died.

We have celebrations in worship today that could be embarrassing for those who think that having bodies and living a history has nothing to do with some pristine, pure idea of a formless God who is too good and too pure to be a body and too distant to care about how we treat each other.

We have a baptism where we use water as a tangible sign of grace. The water that will drip down a forehead is of the earth. It has been steam and rain, it has flowed through rivers and streams, and even through bodies. Most of it came out of a faucet this morning and a little of it, not that long ago, came from a river in Israel and a lake in Scotland. The forehead is of a child who could cry or spit up at any moment and whose diapers often need changing. Water to flesh, God's grace upon a real life, we promise to protect and nurture, and pass on the tradition that wants not only the best for this child, but the best for all children of God.

And today we have a celebration of the "Saints," those who have lived, and now have been baptized by death into the life to come.

We call those who sought, however imperfectly, to live as Christians "saints" because that is what Paul called them. Just as he saw past the faults of the Christians of Colossae and gave thanks for evidence of God's grace in their lives, so do we today. Though lives are messy, just as history is messy, we claim and celebrate any tangible, bodily, lived way anyone reflects the life and witness of Christ; anything worth noticing and passing on to future generations.

Just as God was specifically personal in the lived life of Jesus, we can be specific and personal in what we want to remember and pass on.

Lee using the canvas of her life, with its disease, to serve others,

Carole embracing children of the church,

Mary demonstrating how in loss one can find a new life,

Barbara helping family flourish,



Buddy being eloquent in speech and eloquent in service,
UV seeking God with his mind and praising God with his song,
Fran caring for the dispossessed,
Bill being so loyal to his new home,
Becky committed to raising children of poverty through education,
Bill being such an encourager,
Chris being so gracious to visitors,
Sam responding with faith to the surprises of his life, both good and bad,
Marjorie's love of music and theology,
Alma's sweet spirit,
Ada's commitment to Catholic roots and the ministry of this congregation,
Chris's love of wife and daughter,
Connie's love for words;
Mary Betty's love of beauty and her courage in facing death,
Tina serving the sick
Virginia's loyalty to loved ones,
Adam's sharing a journey with his dad,
Janet's commitment to church life,
Jeanette's compassion and caring for the sick,
Dan's infectious joy in life.

For each life, I've rung a single bell, when each should be remembered for more. But I wanted to say something specific about each one as a symbolic baptism of each of their specific and bodily lives. For, though silly to those who are embarrassed by faith being so history and person bound, faith, if not specific, is of *no use at all* to us and of no use to God.

In the real and human life of Jesus, God demonstrates that Machiavelli was wrong when he said that it is better to be feared than to be loved. When we consider the lives of those who have most impacted our own in ways that bless us and others, it is clear. It is not only better to be loved, it is all that finally matters in the eyes of God who, in tangible and real ways, loves us.

