



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Christ Alone”

Colossians 1:15-23

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During the Trent Symposium for Newly Ordained Minister, I talk to them about “the pastoral role of *Robert’s Rules of Order*.”

Stay with me. I know that leading off that way doesn’t bode well for a sermon, but I won’t talk about Robert’s Rules very long. Think of this as a commercial before the program begins. “[This sermon is brought to you by *Robert’s Rules of Order*. because chaos is not on the agenda.](#)”

As the title reveals, Robert’s Rules is about order, *not* pastoral care. But sometimes keeping order is how pastoral care best comes. In a spirited debate, what protects individual feelings and builds the body is for the moderator to give both sides a hearing, keep the debate focused on issues and not personalities and, when the vote is taken, move on without further debate or comment.

As you might imagine, preachers fret about what to preach following a hotly contested presidential election. Weeks ago, my pastoral intuition told me that on Post-election Sunday, whatever the outcome, I should not try to offer pastoral care in the sermon but preach about the promise and hope of the Gospel. That would be my pastoral care.

I am talking my cue from Paul. Paul had an amazing capacity for theological outbursts. In his letters, he’ll be down in the weeds speaking to whatever issues the church of that city is going through, and suddenly he’ll pull up from the timely to the *timeless*, articulating some theological truth that gives a higher, loftier perspective to whatever the congregation is going through. When he does this, his pause offers a peculiar form of pastoral care for those lost in the weeds of the issues.

Here is a pause of my own. Before I read one of those theological outbursts, I need to say something so the biblical scholars who attend this church will know that I haven’t forgotten what I



learned in seminary. Scholars debate whether or not Colossians was written by Paul himself. Nevertheless, the letter is presented as if written by Paul and reflecting his approach, so in my sermon, I'm going to say that it is.

Now back to my introduction. Before the outburst happens, Paul addresses hot issues in his day that are hard to decipher in our day. He addresses unhealthy teachings within the Colossian church. Colossae is a city in what is now Turkey. It is located on a major trade route. The church reflects the residents of this cosmopolitan city. In the church are

- the rich who prosper from the trade
 - and the poor who service the rich.
- It is made up Romans because it is a Roman city.
 - and Jews because the city provides opportunity.
- There are those who grew up in in the city
 - and those who have moved there from around the world.

Because of the different backgrounds, views and life circumstances, there is an openness in the congregation. But that openness has opened the church to what Paul sees as false teachings that threaten to distort the Gospel message.

Again, those teachings are hard to discern today. As best as I can tell, the teachings that bother Paul come from Jewish teachers who are legalistic, and push Gentiles to adopt the dress, food, rules and religious festivals that set Jews apart from Gentiles. And there are Roman teachers who promote Gnostic escapism from the world- escapism from facing issues that might cast Rome in a bad light. They promote mystical experiences and worship of angels.

Like I said, it's vague. It is enough for today to know that there are issues in the church that Paul addresses at the beginning of the chapter and then returns to in verse 21. But in between comes the outburst.

What I am going to read is Paul's adaptation of what was then a well-known hymn. As I read his outburst, know that a lot is lost in the translation- not lost content, but lost musicality. Though you won't hear the musicality, listen for the soaring vision.

¹⁵ (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

That's the hymn, but the theological outburst continues:

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and



irreproachable before him, ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a minister of this gospel.

The seminary I attended- the seminary Ben, Elizabeth and Nancy attended- offers the Sprunt Lectures. You would have enjoyed hearing some of the scholars who delivered them and would have had a hard time staying awake listening to others. I invited a few of the interesting ones to offer our Edmunds Lectures and neglected to invite the boring ones.

But what always lifted the audience up at the Sprunt Lectures was the *singing of hymns*. The audience was full of highly churched scholars and ministers who knew their way around a hymnbook. They would stand and sing, many in parts,

- “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,”
 - “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,”
 - “God of Grace and God of Glory”
- and it was thrilling.

My heart and spirit would lift to heaven. And when the hymn was done with a few notes still bouncing among the rafters, the audience was in a good place to give the speaker at least a 20-minute hearing before giving up.

Paul knows what he is doing when, in the middle of addressing church issues and false teaching, he breaks into a well-known hymn. Whatever is going on in the Colossian church, he recites a hymn to lift them above the debate.

Now, hold that thought... I mean, hold that hymn. I'll get back to it in a moment. Put this image of the Colossian faith community in your mind. Hearing this letter are Jews who are drawn to legalism and Romans who are drawn to mystical escapism. They all love this hymn that Paul adapts. For the moment of its hearing, they are joined in one voice. For that moment they become one body.

Paul seizes on that moment and talks about it as if it is permanent. He leverages the moment of unity and speaks as if their disunity is past history. “*You who were once estranged and hostile in mind...*” he says. Once estranged? Once hostile?

Are the estrangement and hostility really all in the past? If so, then why does he go on in the next chapter to address false teachings that are causing some estrangement and hostility? Parchment is expensive and hard to come by so why go through the effort to *warn* them about the Gnostic types who (and I'm going to speak as Paul does) prey on the congregation with their empty philosophy and deceit¹ and the Jewish legalists who can't get over Gentiles not wanting to be circumcised,² or eat dishes that are not kosher, or go to their festivals?³

You can guess why. Paul is aspirational here. He is declaring who they are in Christ even for those times when they are not acting like it. He wants them not to lose the miracle that they

¹ Colossians 2:8.

² Colossians 2:11

³ Colossians 2:16



are; a faith community where Jews who obey the Law and Romans who pledge allegiance to Caesar sometimes worship together and eat dinner in each other's homes. He sees how easy it would be in the incredibly diverse trade route city where people live from around the world to fracture into smaller congregations of the like-minded, like-minded- and like skinned:

- Jews being more religious than anyone else with their strict rules and festivals,
 - Romans being more spiritual than anyone else with their mystical practices and angiology that separates them simply because there is so much to memorize.
- poor people meeting where they won't be judged by the rich,
 - rich people meeting where they won't be bothered by the poor,
- Colossae natives meeting where they can talk about those internationals taking over,
 - internationals meeting where they reminisce about the homeland and worship like they did back home.

Historically, I am sure that is happening already. The Colossian church is the whole church of the city and meets in different places, though there are opportunities to come together..., like to hear a letter from Paul.

In this letter, Paul wants to inspire them but he doesn't wish comfort on them. His whole ministry is about bringing together Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor. And so, he uses this hymn to lift them above all their allegiances, causes, and cultural markers.

- He lifts Jews high enough so that they will see again that their savior is the God they know in Jesus, not their rules and festivals.
- He lifts the Romans high enough so they will see again that their core identity is in Christ not in Caesar being their ruler.

He lifts them all high enough so that they will see again that the social and political markers of who they are should not- must not- get in the way of their being brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember, Paul is not singing a "Come to Jesus" hymn. He is not trying to bring people into the church. This is a "Remember Jesus" hymn.

- Christians can forget what binds them.
- Churches can forget what saves them.

The hymn reminds those who have professed Jesus as their Lord that *he alone is their Lord*. The hymn reminds the church

- in whom they are reconciled,
- who is their head,
- who makes them as a church one body in the world.

The music of the beloved hymn that lifts them, but it is the content of the hymn that reminds them.



- Caesar wants the Romans in the church to believe that being Roman is what most *distinguishes them, elevates them and makes them special* over others.
- Some Jewish teachers would have the Jews of the church believe that eating, dressing, and worshipping like Jews is what most *distinguishes them, elevates them and makes them special* over others.

The hymn reminds both Roman and Jew Christians what another of Paul's quoted hymns in Philippians says. What lifts them to God is the Christ who lowered himself to them. Christ surrendered all claims of superiority—including his being equal to God—by emptying himself to being a loving servant of all even to the point of this death and resurrection. That is why every knee should bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord because what distinguishes him is the saving love and grace of God that saves us from ourselves... and saves us from looking to our causes to save us... and saves us from our claims to superiority.

Now when Paul's theological outburst plays itself out, he goes back to addressing the church's issues. But now we remember. Now we remember that our ultimate allegiance isn't to any leader, or cause, or cultural marker, or nationality. There is no exceptionalism in Christ. And with that reminder, and with the humility that it inspires, we can listen to each other, bend to each other, find the common ground that is possible when we are grounded in Jesus.

A final, but very important note: After his theological outburst, Paul can't sign off. He has to go back the issues because the problem is that those false teachers are teaching in the name of Jesus.

In Paul's day,

and in our day,

and in every day,

there will be false teachings in Jesus' name. There will be those who will speak of Jesus as if he is a chaplain of their certainty- the chaplain of whatever social or political agenda they are pushing.

So, what are we to do but—again—be reminded. Go to the Jesus of the Gospels. Pay attention to what Jesus does and who he is with.

- Remember how he attends to the needs of the masses when they are hungry
 - and how he ignores the masses when one hurting and ignored woman grabs the hem of his garment.
- Remember how he heals the sick without judgement of their need,
 - and how he argues with the self-righteous without rejecting them.
- Remember how he honors the Law of the Jews,
 - and how he praises the theological insights of the Samaritan woman.

Watch him. Watch him and listen to him. Listen to his Sermon on the Mount as he calls for humility, generosity and loving action so strongly that he ends his sermon with threats and warnings because it does matter how we live and treat each other. Then remember what happens to him as he forgives those who let him down, and how God then raises him from the dead. And



remember how the risen Jesus tells the freshly humbled and freshly forgiven disciples to not stop—to go into all the messy world that rejected him and, by grace, be in the messy, complicated world as Jesus is in the world.

Remember *that* Jesus, not the Jesus of false teachers who throw his name around.
Remember *that* Jesus where heaven reveals itself on earth.

But before you go out in the world, having freshly remembered, sing, sing, sing of what it is that we remember that frees us from the slavery of our causes. Sing of God's love and saving grace. That's the perspective of the Gospel we need.

