

Sermon on **Colossians 1:3-8** for Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Paul's Lutheran – June 20, 2021– N. Scharf (Father's Day)

*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people – the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.* (NIV 2011)

**Give Thanks to the Lord for Growth. Look forward to the Reunion.**

Do you like big family reunions? I'm not just talking about the ones that have your immediate family with your grandma and grandpa and all their kids. I'm talking about the ones that have all the relatives of your grandparents – their siblings and a great great aunt or uncle thrown in, along with all the kids and grandkids. As a kid I remember attending a few and being surprised at having so much family I didn't even know about. And some of them were pretty cool. You got an education in second cousins and third cousins and by the end of the festivities you were friends and not just relatives. It's a reason to give thanks to God that you have family.

Paul, the great missionary and church planter, had never been to the congregation at Colosse. Another Christian had started the congregation. His name was Epaphras. Epaphras travelled from Colosse all the way to visit Paul imprisoned in Rome to encourage him and tell him about all that was happening in Colosse. Paul had family in Christ he didn't even know about. He writes a heartfelt letter to them **thanking God for them and looking forward to the reunion.**

They're usually the ones at the family reunion with white hair, a walker or cane parked by their side, hunkered down under a canopy or the shade of a tree visiting with their siblings. To you they're just Grandpa and Grandma, but it's because of them that you exist! Paul gives thanks where thanks is due – to the one who did all this and made us exist! *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you."*

He prays to the only true God who is responsible for this family. God the Father sent God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ to suffer and die on the cross in our place to pay the price of our redemption and rise again, so that we could rightly and legally be called children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul gives thanks that he has brought more and more into the family – most notably these Colossian brothers and sisters.

He gave thanks to the Father for the faith in their hearts, and the way it showed itself – in genuine love for their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. *"...because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all God's people."* Epaphras' trip in and of itself was evidence. They genuinely loved each other and Paul as brothers and sisters.

The word for love used here is not the one that describes a love based on common interest or experience – friendship love (philia). It's not the love of opposites attract/complementary that you might see in two newlyweds (eros). It's not even a love of dependence – like a child needs and loves its father or mother (storge). This "agape" love is the love that begins in the giver and is expressed to another whether they are deserving or undeserving, whether bringing a benefit to the one who loves or bringing difficulty. This self-sacrificing love is displayed perfectly by God, *"God loved the world in this way that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

This is a smart, informed, and faithful love that is not swayed by fickle emotion, nor is it partners with falsehood. Jesus reached out to those caught in sin, but he did not condone their sin. He came to save them from it. This is good to remember in today's culture that seeks to define love as permissiveness and approval of whatever someone is feeling strongly whether it be good or sinful. We live in a world where the devil is boldly lying to people to make them think truth is subjective and not absolute, or that love is detached from God's will. Jesus said, *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). We love as Jesus loved.

But we would be liars if we said that we didn't like the lie sometimes when we want affirmation for our sinful attitudes or excuses. When we treat God's commands and his will for us as a buffet line in our day to day

lives in family, friendships, and business. You know, I'll only apply this command and forget about these other ones. Then my family or friends will like me more. If I just forget what God has said about this, then I'll find the unity we're looking for. Compromise can be good, but when we compromise the truth of God's Word to try to find some common ground, compromise has become an evil thing. What does God think of this, of us?

As kids, when we had really crossed the line, it wasn't a matter that would be handled by just mom. She would bring in dad. We would go to the high court just inside their room by the bedstand. Dad would talk to us and explain why we were going to be disciplined. After a spanking that felt 10x worse than mom's he would set us free. He always said, "This hurts me more than it hurts you."

For our God, his Law is good, but punishment does not bring him joy. *"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live"* (Ezekiel 33:11). In fact, you could say he didn't punish the guilty, us, for our sins. In mercy, the Father sacrificed his own perfect Son to pay the penalty we deserved eternally – hell – suffered on the cross of calvary. In place of wrath we have God's forgiveness for our sin and sinfulness. Yes, he still loves us enough to discipline us, to stop us in our sin, wake us up and bring us back to himself in repentance and forgiveness. Then he sets us free to serve again. This love makes us love.

What bonds us together? Paul writes, *"the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you."* The faith that the Holy Spirit has created in your heart comes from this gospel message of full forgiveness in our crucified and resurrected Savior. It comes from the reality that this is not our permanent place. This life is the road we travel on as he leads us one step closer to heaven – our eternal dwelling, where our true citizenship is held. This reality changes our perspective to see our fellow Christians not as the competition or as strangers but as siblings – a group of adopted spiritual orphans who now belong and work together because of our common Father and common expectation of our eternal life.

This has come to us through the Gospel. It is objective and absolute truth – God's Word. It benefits you when you use it, trust it, and live according to it. This is how he grows you, matures you. Like a good parent he instructs you, feeds you, disciplines you, awakens you, strengthens you in the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, and he sends you to put them into practice in every area of your life. He grows your faith and love!

What fruit it bears! *"In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf."* Paul heard about the faith and fruits of faith - love - that was abounding in Colosse. God's love for us in Christ does this for believers and among believers. They loved one another. You love one another.

Your faith in the Lord has grown here and your love as well. At St. Paul's, it is great to hear reports of who is serving not only before everyone's eyes, but behind the scenes – in care calling, visitation, volunteering, organizing, encouraging, praying. It's neat to see so many here worshipping regularly together as this mishmash of adopted spiritual orphans made family by our Father in heaven, a weekly family reunion we get to enjoy as we worship our Lord and hear his Word together.

A highlight from this week - our congregation sent a mission group of teens and two adults to Arlington Texas just last week to help our sister congregation with a Bible Soccer Camp. Our brothers and sisters in Christ in Arlington were excited to join together in the work. We were able to provide the teen helpers, an age group they have very few in, and they were able to provide many adult volunteers and helpers. Their love and hospitality overflowed – hosting our team in their houses, and providing for our needs while we were there. Our congregation provided funds for travel and workers. We enjoyed the fellowship founded in God's Word as we worshiped together last Sunday, learned in Bible Study together, sat around the fire in the church parking lot, and shared the Word of God with little ones who came for the Bible Soccer camp. As we left, we said, "God be with you till we meet again."

Because of Jesus we know we will meet again, whether here in time, or in our heavenly home. We are bonded by the truth, by the Grace of God, and we will continue to grow in faith and love through the Gospel until we are called to that great reunion of all believers in heaven. Keep growing in God's Word and in your love for each other. **Give Thanks to the Lord for growth. Look forward to the reunion. Amen.**