

Proper 10/Pentecost 5

Colossians 1:1-14

July 14, 2019

Saints in Light in Sarnia

Dear brothers and sisters loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The assigned epistle readings for the next four

weeks take us through the letter of St. Paul to the

church in the city of Colossae, and so we will track along with these readings up through

the first Sunday in August as we hear portions of this wonderful letter of St. Paul. I

encourage you to spend some time during these weeks reading this at home and making it

part of your daily devotions as well — it's not that long, you can read the entire epistle in

the time it takes to have a coffee break. You should acquaint yourself with this epistle

because the content of St. Paul's message is a clear and concise exposition of Christ and

Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, if you were to select the one thing that is

most striking about the Epistle to the Colossians it is the description of Christ and His

relation not only to the church but to the entire universe.

By way of context, the letter to the Colossians is one of the captivity letters of St. Paul,

along with the letters to the Ephesians and the Philippians, which are other cities, and the

letter to Philemon, who is a person. What we mean by captivity letter is, as you can

probably guess, that St. Paul wrote these epistles during imprisonment. He was probably



in Rome. And on the one hand his captivity seems to be restrictive because at the end of the letter to the Colossians he asked the people to “remember my chains” (Col 4:18). On the other hand he was able to receive visitors and correspond with the outside world. So I suppose it was somewhere between house arrest and the county jail.

One of these visitors was a man named Epaphras, who is mentioned in our reading today. Epaphras has come to Paul, he has travelled all the way to Rome, to discuss an issue in the church back in Colossae. Epaphras might be the person who started the church in that area and now he is their pastor — St. Paul refers to him as a “fellow servant.” But now he needs some help. False teaching is infecting the church like a virus. It is an issue of heresy, a teaching that is leading people away from Christ, an alternative explanation of who He is and what He has done. Without getting into all the details we can very simply say that something is going on there which is what St. Paul in his first letter to Timothy Paul calls a “different doctrine.” But here is the interesting thing about the apostle Paul’s relationship to the church in Colossae: he’s never been there. He never preached there in person, he never stopped by to teach the ladies bible study, he never had coffee fellowship or attended a potluck. This city was never on the itinerary throughout all his journeys. Yet he writes them this letter, which would have undoubtedly been read in a church service in multiple locations, in order to bring the the people back to orthodoxy, back to the rule of faith that he had spread on the basis of his calling into the ministry of the Gospel as an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Guess what? We at Christ Lutheran Church in Sarnia have some things in common with the church Colossae. We have never met St. Paul either. Almost 2,000 years later we also have his letter to read in our church service. And the same words with which Paul opens

his greeting to the people, and in fact all of his epistles, come to us and to all Christians throughout all generations. “Grace to you and peace.” What is the source of grace to you? Where does this peace come from? From God our Father, Paul writes, through your “your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col 1:4-5).

There is another thing we have in common with that ancient church. It is the need for reconciliation with the Father who offers such grace as St. Paul speaks of. In fact the entire church universal down throughout the ages shares this need with the rest of the world. A little later in the letter St. Paul reminds them of what they have come out of, he says that the saints in Collosae “once were alienated and hostile in mind” (Col 1:21). To what? To God. Hostile to God, hostile to the mind of God, to his Holy Things, unable to stand in his presence and tainted by sin. So even as Paul recalls God’s gifts to his people he reminds them how they are debtors with respect to God’s grace. God’s people did not receive his teaching and power but continued to worship their own idols and to live as though he did not matter or even exist. The people adored their own works and self righteousness. Oh that’s just these mixed up Colossians, right?

Nope. Everyone. In this letter Paul uses a very interesting word to describe this need we all have to be placed into right relationship with the Father through the Son — “qualified” — “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12). In the epistles we have in the New Testament that word is used by Paul only here and in the first letter to the Corinthians. What does that mean, to be qualified, and what does it mean to be qualified for an inheritance?

Well, everyone who enters into the Kingdom of Heaven needs to possess a certain quality, a set of characteristics. Salvation requires this. What is that quality? Righteousness. Holiness. And that's the problem, for people who are alienated from God and hostile in mind are in no way qualified to obtain these qualities. But God in his infinite grace and mercy qualifies us anyway, he declares us righteous for the sake of His only begotten Son who went to the cross for all sinners. God supplies the holiness. God gives us his righteousness through His Son, which we lay hold of in our Baptism, through faith. So even though St. Paul has never met these citizens of Colossae he is sure of their faith, he has the assurance that God's people are qualified to share in the inheritance, "the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13-14). He is sure that Epaphras has instructed them and therefore the Word of truth, the Gospel, is bearing fruit and increasing — "since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth" (Col 1:6-7). So here again the words of St. Paul come to us in Christ Lutheran Church Sarnia just as they were revealed to the church in Colossae, for along with them we have been brought out of the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom, now "saints in light." Here is why St. Paul can open his letter with these words of thanksgiving: "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we 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" (Col 1:3-5).

Paul commends the Colossians for their love for all the saints, the "saints in light," because their love for one another is not separated from the love of the Father given through Christ Jesus. It flows from it. His love, the love that qualifies them into the

kingdom, creates faith, and that faith works love. Paul has never met them but he teaches them, he reminds them, because it comes from the Word of God. Paul has never met you but the Word of God comes to you this day the same way. The redemption won by Christ has delivered all of us so that “filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (Col 1:9–10). What does that look like? He says it’s about bearing fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

You have heard the Gospel. It has come to you. You have believed it. You are redeemed. You are baptized. You eat your Lord’s flesh and drink his blood. Often. It is for your forgiveness. It is to strengthen your love. Not only is there life in the body and blood of Jesus unto forgiveness; there is strength unto love of our neighbour. You are “saints in light” in Sarnia.

Nevertheless, our love is not what it seems or what it ought to be. We need to be patient with one another, bearing one another’s burdens. Our love needs bolstering, improvement. It receives strengthening from the faith that us freely given by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is not easy, there are false teachers that want to lead us astray just like the Colossians were tempted. Faith can falter, love can grow cold, priorities can change, God gets whatever is leftover. But still he gives and gives abundantly through the gifts of his church.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ✠ Soli Deo Gloria