Colossians 1:15-29

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things
were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers
or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all
things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is
the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the
supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to
reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making
peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil
behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present
you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith,
established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel
that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I,
Paul, have become a servant.
24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in
regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I have become its
servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its
fullness— 26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now
disclosed to the Lord's people. 27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles
the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we
may present everyone fully mature in Christ. 29 To this end I strenuously contend with all the
energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Sermon on Colossians 1:15-29
CCRC, 20 October 2024
Rev. Tom Bomhof
The Main Thing

Dear Friends of God,

Leadership guru Stephen R. Covey is famous for saying,

> The main thing is the keep the main thing the main thing.

If you've ever chaired a meeting, or run a business, or even started a project in your yard, you know how true that is. Once you lose focus on the main thing you set out to do, things go sideways, efforts become scattered, members get divided, and you find yourself far away from where you thought you'd be. It's so easy to get distracted and go off in a different direction. You start your Bible study talking about the fruit of the Spirit, and somehow you find yourself showing your favourite cat video. You have one afternoon to winterize your garden and as you're working at it you notice a broken pot that needs gluing, so you search for the glue, and you notice you didn't sweep the leaves away from the garage door, and next thing you know you're raking leaves off the lawn. You took your eye off the main thing and got distracted.
*
The church in Colossae needed to hear this advice. They were fast losing sight of the main thing. Strange teachings were beginning to distract them, leading them away from the profound, life-giving truth about Jesus. They were beginning to take to heart the teachings of those who followed Paul wherever he went. Scholars aren't able to find exactly what they taught, but it appeared to be some mysticism, some earth-denying anti-physicalism, and veneration of spiritual beings. They taught that matter was the source of evil. Everything you could touch or taste or see led ultimately to sin and evil. The body was a tomb, but the Spirit was liberation. Salvation consisted of freeing the soul or spirit of a person from the degrading influence and entanglements of the body. These teachers had a problem with a spiritual God who is connected to the material earth. They taught that there was a great chain of being between earth and God. They taught that they had to look for other superior beings like angels and spirit beings who could give them the secret passwords they needed to enter the "fullness" of spiritual enlightenment and somehow bridge the gap between them and God. They taught that Jesus Christ was one of those spirit beings in that chain of being—not fully human nor fully divine, but one of those spiritual beings who brought them closer to God.

Paul heard about this and determined that the Colossians were losing sight of the main thing. So, in a couple more of his dense run-on sentences, Paul reminds them about the main thing. This is the main thing: Jesus. What they needed to keep in the spotlight, to focus on above all, if they were going to make any progress in the Christian life, growing in wisdom, power, patience and thanksgiving, is the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ. The more they focus on Jesus, getting to know Jesus, getting to know about Jesus, the more they will understand

who God is, the more they will discover what salvation is, and the more they will discover what being human is.

To be fair, the Colossians were deeply concerned about where God's true presence is to be found and how human beings may gain access to that presence. Paul immediately addresses that concern:

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> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Jesus Christ is not just "partly" God or a "semi-God." He is the image of the invisible God. Nobody has ever seen God, but in Jesus God has come near to us to reveal who he is. When you see Jesus, you see God. He is above all created beings in heaven and earth, visible or invisible, above all thrones, powers or authorities. When you have access to Jesus, you have access to God. You don't need any other intermediary, any other spirit-being to gain access to the presence of God. Jesus is all you need.

If they needed this stated more clearly, Paul does so in verse 19:

> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him

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In one of her signature songs, Country singer Loretta Lynn famously sang,

> If you're lookin' at me
> You're lookin' at country

Here Paul says, if you're looking at Jesus, you're looking at God. What you discover about Jesus is what you discover about God. How close you are to Jesus is how close you are to God. Who is the Church's Lord? God embodied in the human likeness of Jesus. Not Zeus, not some spiritual force out there, not "the universe" - only God, one God seen in Jesus.

Ralph Martin puts it this way:

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> He is not a copy or likeness of God but the "projection" of God on the canvas of our humanity and the embodiment of the divine in the world of men and women
>
> Ralph Martin

*

That tells us that as you look more and more at Jesus, you'll see that God is the God of self-giving love. God loved the world so much he came to us in Jesus, and sacrificed himself for us. That also tells us that God in Christ is deeply connected to this earth. God does not think the world is evil because it is material. God loves the material world so much that he took on a physical body and became one of us. Indeed, he created all that we see and therefore loves it.

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Focus on Christ and you'll be focusing on God, learning about God, gaining the presence of God. No need to look to some esoteric and mystery-laden wisdom. In Jesus you have all you need to know who God is.

Paul goes on. He says that as you focus on the centrality and supremacy of Jesus, you'll learn what true salvation is all about. Salvation isn't about freeing your pure spirit from your evil physical body and the evil physical world. Salvation has to do with being in a right relationship with our creator. Once again that draws us to Jesus.

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> For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

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Notice how many times he uses the term "all things". Four times in short order he speaks about Jesus being instrumental in creation. All things were made by him and in him all things hold together. Four times in these two verses and seven times in the first six verses Paul mentions "all creation", "all things" and "everything." Christ is supreme over all by right of being creator of all.

This echoes what John says in his gospel:

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> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life… John 1:3-4a

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Jesus isn't some white guy with a beard, dressed in linens and looking up, as that famous portrait by Warner Sallman would have us think. *Jesus is immensely powerful, the foundation and unity of the created universe, above and before all things. It is he for whom and through whom and in whom the whole creation was made in the first place.

The natural world was his idea from the beginning. It was his plan, his workmanship. It is beautiful, powerful, comforting, life-giving because he made it like that. When you go out in nature and see the lavish beauty and the exquisite design, the powerful symmetry, and wonderful cooperation, and you are filled with awe, remember that it's like that because of Jesus.

But you'll also see brokenness in the world. There is pain, darkness, evil, misery and trouble in the world. Just tune into the news and you'll hear about how the creation is groaning, how humans are finding new ways to torment each other and wage war against each other. Wickedness, corruption, cruelty and estrangement mark this world. There are powers at work to degrade and destroy life. We know this is true. There is somewhere inside of us that recognizes that this isn't the way it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be beautiful and good.

The good news is that God has taken the actions to heal the world of all that pains it. That action is by coming into the world through the person of Jesus. Jesus, the person through whom the world was first created has now come to be the instrument of re-creation. He has come to renew the world and give new life.
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> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
>
> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Here is the good news of Jesus to keep in front of you. There is not condemnation for us "who were once estranged and hostile...doing evil deeds." He doesn't single people out or condemn them all, but rather brings good to new to all which is reconciliation. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation and he is the firstborn of the dead. Salvation is through his death and resurrection.

There is no other way to get back to God. The false teachers of Colossae said they had to follow
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> *A rigorous discipline of asceticism and self-denial. Abstinence, especially from food and drink; observance of holy seasons for fasting and affliction of the soul (2:16); possibly a life of celibacy and mortification of the human body (2:21, 23)—all these exercises and taboos were prescribed as part of the regimen to be accepted if the Christians at Colossae were ever to gain "fullness of life" (2:10).*
>
> Ralph P. Martin, Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians & Philemon

It was Jesus-and. Jesus and all these practices. But the fullness of life consists of a relationship with our creator, which is found only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His sacrifice has paid the full price for our sin, freeing us to live in relationship to God again.
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When you keep Christ the main thing, all forms of works righteousness fall away. The only gospel you need to believe is the one that says it is only by God's grace to us in Jesus that we are saved.

Paul goes further. When you keep the centrality and supremacy of Christ as the main thing, you find your true humanity. He offers us a way to be genuinely human in this often-inhumane world.
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> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,

Christ is the head, the source of life, the fount of renewal. This is the groundwork of the Christian life. When we believe in Jesus, he renews us and restores us. When we participate in his death and resurrection, we die to old loyalties and rise to a new life that is centred in Christ and that acknowledges his supreme lordship.

Paul speaks about the new life as a revealed mystery
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> God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

When all around them the mystery religions are teaching them do this or do that, honour this spirit or bow to this authority in order to experience true life, or say these secret words to gain access to God, Paul lays out the main thing: * Christ in you. That is the truth. That is the mystery that is revealed to us. That is the pathway to life, to full human living. Christ in you, with all his wisdom, grace, power, glory, hope and newness. Christ in you—the way you become a better human being. Christ in you—the hope of glory.

This is the path to fully human life, one that is rich in spirit and full of joy. Jesus summons us to follow him and find a newness, a new beginning grounded in full forgiveness, a new freedom found in his presence within us. Jesus summons us to ask him into our hearts and then to find ourselves rich in every spiritual blessing

We as Christians are prone to getting off topic, distracted, majoring in minor things. Paul's reminder to the Colossians is a reminder to us all. Keep the main thing the main thing: the centrality and supremacy of Jesus. Christ in us, among us, through us, for us. When we keep that the main thing, we grow strong in a relationship with God, we grow strong in a sense of the power of God's grace and salvation, and we grow strong in a sense of who we are in this world as followers of Jesus. May the Holy Spirit bless us as we keep Jesus as the main thing.

AMEN