

“Getting Your Stride”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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First Scripture Lesson: 1 John 2:12-14

Epistle Lesson: Colossians 1:3,4, 9-14

Julia Dray of Maryland recalls being stuck in traffic with her 4-year-old daughter on an unbearably hot August afternoon. “We were already late,” she says, “both of us were incredibly thirsty, and there was no relief in sight – a tightly packed mass of cars stretched into a shimmering distance of haze and fumes.” Out of frustration, she finally cried out, “How long is this going to go on? What am I going to do? Oh my God!” It was at that moment her daughter, Mary, in her quiet 4-year-old voice, said, “If you didn’t sound so angry with him, you could probably hear him better.”¹ “And a little child shall lead them” – Isaiah 11:6.

Last Sunday we began our sermon series titled “Living a Life of Faith: Step by Step.” We saw how those who are new to Christianity can sometimes surprise us with remarkable insight, such as listening for God’s voice amid life’s greatest upsets, stuck in traffic. And yet, those of us who have spent more days as Christians walking this earth – and driving its highways – we are supposed to have a firmer grasp on what it means to be a follower of Christ and a stronger footing to keep us from being knocked off the path when it comes to church life.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we find three places to stand firm in the faith, come what may. And that’s a good thing, because as mature Christians we are also the Christians who are most thoroughly engaged in the world. Many of us are still in the workforce and responsible for the household income. Many have children or grandchildren to raise. We often find ourselves stuck in traffic. Many of us are juggling schedules and maintaining budgets that make it hard to get to church each Sunday, share in the work of ministry during the week, give financially to the church. It’s a good thing we are mature in our Christian faith, because life as a responsible adult is not for the faint of heart. And Paul knows this.

So Paul writes to the Christians in Colosseae reminding them – and us – how important our faith is amid a world that is often chaotic, disappointing, tragic, and overwhelming. The three places Paul points us to in standing firm in the faith are, 1) being filled with the knowledge of God’s will, 2) being made strong in the power of God alone, and 3) preparing ourselves to endure hard times with patience, joy and thanksgiving.

Wow. Just think if you were filled with the knowledge of God’s will, strong in the power of God himself, and equipped to endure hard times with patience, joy and thanksgiving! Well,

¹ www.homileticonline.com, retrieved Sept. 10, 2019.

there's nothing that could hurt you, right? Nothing that could sideline you when it comes to living a life worthy of the Lord, pleasing to God, blessed by the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the truth is we get sidelined all the time, don't we? There's not a day that goes by, for any of us, that we don't face temptation, having to discern right from wrong.

Every week, it seems, we are so over programmed that we hardly have time to think, not to mention pray, sit and listen for God's word, seek the Lord's guidance, comfort and peace. And then there's the unexpected. It seems that not a month goes by without something happening that tests our limits – financially, emotionally, physically, spiritually. We just can't get a break!

And so Paul comes to us with this reminder of what it means to be a good, solid Christian amid a world that seems hell bent on knocking us off our footing. Paul says, "... 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...."

Here we see that knowing God's will means applying spiritual wisdom and understanding. When faced with the challenges of daily living, we need to stop and seek spiritual wisdom and understanding, as opposed to relying solely on worldly wisdom and understanding.

The world tells us "what's mine is mine," but the Spirit tells us to give of ourselves for the sake of others. The world tells us there's not enough time to get everything done, but the Spirit tells us that, if we do God's will, what we get done will be enough, sufficient, wholly pleasing to the Lord, regardless of what the world says or thinks about what we missed out on doing or accomplishing.

The world tells us "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but the Spirit tells us to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give a little more than what's comfortable. In other words, stretch ourselves in our faith, faith that God will provide, faith that the Spirit will renew our strength like the wings of Eagles (Is. 40:31), faith that the Lord is the only righteous judge (2 Tim. 4:8) and who are we to seek vengeance or hold grudges (Rom. 12:17-19).

"Be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding," says Paul, "so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grown in the knowledge of God." That is what it is to be a Christian of mature faith, patience, joy and thanksgiving come what way –.

Paul continues his prayer on our behalf, saying, "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power...." This means that as Christians, relying on our own strength is futile. We will never stand up to the temptations of the world, the busyness of life, those overwhelming circumstances that hit out of the blue, unless we rely on God's strength through prayer, by listen for the Holy Spirit, by turning to the word of God.

Now the hard part about doing this, as Christians, is that those around us who are operating apart from Christian faith and values seem to be getting ahead. And this can tempt us to follow their lead instead of God's, cause us to question God's power and purpose, pull us from the pathway Jesus lays before us. This is why we come to worship every week – to be fortified against temptation, assured of God's power and purpose, brought back onto the path that Jesus walked.

Finally, Paul prays that we would “be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled (us) to share in the inheritance of the saints....”

At the time Paul wrote those words to the Colossians, most everyone believed Jesus would return at any moment and set things right. And then Paul and other spiritual leaders began to realize Jesus was serious when he said, “... Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” When they realized that generation after generation would have to live and die amid the struggles of this world, Paul and the others learned what it means to endure all things with patience, joy and thanksgiving. And that is what we are learning, also.

As Christians who are mature in the faith and responsible for building up the kingdom amid a fallen world, we must maintain the faith with patience, joy and thanksgiving.

This is not easy work, people! Never was. And yet, here we are, more than 2,000 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and our faith is strong. Oh, we will have our moments – we do have moments of weakness, temptation, uncontrollable upset, and even failure as God's children, but we do not lose hope. In fact, the harder things get the more we seek that place of patience, joy and thanksgiving, knowing that God's promises are true, that Christ's presence is sure, and that the Holy Spirit is guiding us even now, in being the hands and feet and heart of Jesus.

As Paul says, “(God) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

What more do we need to know to maintain our faith and build up the church? If God is for us, who can stand against us? (Rom. 8:31) It is in that conviction, that faith, that we pass along the faith to those who come after us, so that they, too, may live in the hope and peace of the Holy Spirit, the joy of knowing the Lord, and the love of living life in service and praise of God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord of all creation, we know your heart aches for all who suffer, as do ours. We pray that you would draw near to those who grieve, lay your healing hand upon those who are ill or injured, send your Spirit of restoration and strength for those recovering physically, emotionally, spiritually.

We pray, too, for ourselves, that we would be led, equipped and strengthened in reaching out to those in need, offering a word of encouragement, a helping hand, a listening ear.

Let us be instruments of your grace and mercy, trumpeters of your praise and glory, witness to your work of ministry in us and through us.

We pray all this in your name, O Lord, and using the words that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**