

“Faith When the World is Burning”

Colossians 1:15-28

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9th Sunday After Pentecost

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Not too long ago, I was asked to do a wedding for a couple of friends, one Christian, one from another faith. As we began the planning process, the other celebrant called and asked one thing of me – that I not mention Jesus in the ceremony. It wasn’t the first time I’d received such a request. I’ve given plenty of prayers at public directing ministers like me to give only “non-sectarian prayer,” which every Christian pastor knows translates to “no Jesus, please.”

Unlike some Christian ministers, I am sympathetic to the motives behind the request, even though I cannot abide by it. When the co-celebrant in the wedding shared with me some of her experiences of Christian ministers using Jesus like a club to pummel her and the rest of non-Christian attendees, I had to admit that I’d probably adopt the same clear posture.

The co-celebrant and I worked it all out but only after hours of conversation led to trust between two strangers. By the time we stood together before the couple taking their vows, I believe she understood that it was *because* of Jesus that I would never intentionally use our faith as a club, not in spite of him.

The author of Colossians doesn’t have all that baggage to deal with. In the early second century, in what is now modern-day Turkey, the church hasn’t had any power to abuse. It hasn’t had the power of numbers, or the power of influence, the power of money, or the power of the state. So when the author argues for the supremacy of Christ, he’s arguing to a minority community of people who seem completely irrelevant to the powers around them. And he’s writing to a group of people who chose this irrelevancy in the world’s eyes for one reason – they believed that Christ had brought them close to God. They believed that because of Christ, forgiveness had triumphed over the cycle of retribution. Because of Christ the whole world had changed.

But now those same people were questioning whether Christ is sufficient. Questioning whether the gospel message is adequate for a world that seems to be coming unhinged. Questioning whether the good news is enough in a world seemed out of control.

We understand that kind of doubt. Doubting whether God’s power is sufficient to live in a world where other evil powers are on the upswing. Whether the gospel message of reconciliation through Christ is adequate in a world where fear seems to be the main thing that all human beings share. Whether the good

news that Christ has overcome human sin, defeated evil, opened a way beyond death – whether we believe this news is enough for us to live in this world.

Because it's not looking sufficient to a lot of the people I've been listening to these last couple of weeks. Some of us are openly despairing about the state of the world and where it's headed. Openly despairing about whether the killing here and around the world is going to stop. Openly despairing about whether the racism in our country that makes people of color more vulnerable to bad cops is ever going to be addressed or even acknowledged. Openly despairing about whether good cops are becoming so maligned that violence is going to overtake them, too. Openly despairing about both the growing divides and the foolish reactions of electorates across the world. Openly despairing about big development deals creating more white, upper-class enclaves at precisely the time when Freddie Gray's Baltimore has never been more apparent.

I've heard that despair. It sounds like a comment I heard about last week from the tearful words of a black youth who said, "I just don't think white people get it and I'm not sure they ever will." I heard it from a neighbor who exclaimed, "I don't think I can take the city any more." I heard it from a police officer who reminded me that the more police feel hated, the less good, community-minded people will want to become one. I heard it from a business leader who said, "I appreciated your anecdotes of police and residents working together, but if the shootings don't stop, it won't make any difference." And I heard it from a friend, an African-American man who when asked "How are you feeling about this week?" simply shook his head as if to say, "Andrew, if I have to explain it to you, it's not even worth getting into."

We are confronted this morning with the shocking claim that this gospel message is more than enough to live in a world where the powers of sin and violence and death still seem to be winning - the Gospel that claims that God has redeemed the world, and is on the way to making it whole. Which is to say it's a bigger claim than a lot of us are probably prepared to accept this morning. And maybe that reality puts us a lot closer to those vulnerable Colossians, than to their privileged, powerful descendants whose legacy we are used to explaining or defending or condemning. Maybe it puts us a lot closer to those vulnerable Colossians than many of us have ever been or ever wanted to be. People who doubt the power of gospel not from a safe place, but in that place where you know that the world is much more out of control than you ever wanted to accept. When you realize that peace isn't guaranteed, safety isn't guaranteed - another day really isn't guaranteed.

"Through Christ," the text claims, "God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross." Because of Jesus nothing is irreconcilable. No person is beyond God's reach. No part of creation is beyond God's repair. God has already taken care of the foundational divide between God and human beings. God has bridged it. The whole world is more in God's hands than it seems. The claim doesn't get any bigger than

that. A confrontation because the evil that we see played out on a daily basis, and this Gospel that says God is still on the move.

And I'm kind of glad for that confrontation this morning. Because I don't have the patience to stand in this pulpit and talk about little chicken soup for the soul moments this morning. It would make me sick to stand here and feed you false hope that comes when a person like me tries to make Jesus look better by saying the state of the world is not quite as bad as it seems. I couldn't take it if I had to stand here and say that the gospel message is really about theological positions or spiritual supplements that don't have much to do with what's going on in the world.

I'm glad to stand here and say either Christ's death and resurrection is evidence that the powers of this world do not win or none of what we do here is important. Either Jesus is in fact Lord, which is to say that God makes sure that suffering leads to something beyond itself, that forgiveness is more powerful than the cycle of retribution, that love is stronger than fear, or we should just shut down the church and go home.

The hard part of the Gospel according to this part of Colossians is that the greatest testimony to the truth of the Gospel doesn't come when things are going well. It doesn't come when life or the world is working out the way you hoped it to or even the way that is right and just. Sure, gratitude can be a powerful testimony to the power of faith in your life.

But the most powerful testimony, according to the writer of this book, is when the baptized are given an opportunity to suffer for God's way. Are given an opportunity to suffer for what is good and right and true. "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." It's not that God enjoys anyone's suffering or looks to exact suffering from any of us. I don't think that's what the writer is saying. It's not that God sends suffering so that others find faith. We do not worship that kind of a sadistic God.

No I think that when we suffer for the sake of what is good and right and true, we are close to experiencing and knowing the mystery of God's love for us. Of a God who loves us so much, that she chooses to suffer on our behalf. And when the world sees that kind of love - lived not when things are easy, or secure, or safe but in the face of evil, in the face of despair, in the face of injustice, the Word is made known - Christ is made known - God is revealed for a people hungry for nothing less.

And if that Christ was the one that Christians declared as supreme. . . The one risking healing in the midst of violence, the one overturning tables of injustice, the one crossing boundaries justified by layers of history and culture, the one choosing to give his life not just for his followers but for every bit of God's creation, then we would never have to worry about offering Jesus-free prayers. It wouldn't even come

up. Because our friends and family of other faiths would know the depth of our love for them, not if they believed in Jesus, but because we do. We wouldn't have two Baltimores, because the poor would know the depth of the church's love for and with them until the day they become as much of a priority as all of our other priorities. Black men and women would know that their lives do matter to the church and will matter to the nation because they'd see a church unwilling to let the racism in our culture go unacknowledged and unchecked. And the great majority of the police in our nation who really do want to protect and serve, the great majority of young people in our city's neighborhoods who really do want to be safe, would be at a table hosted by the church. They'd be willing to meet us there because we would have demonstrated the depth of our commitment to carve path of nonviolence even at risk to ourselves.

That's the faith of the writer of this book. One who walks toward the fires instead of away from them because he knows that God is already there – God is always there. And the church has an invitation to be there, too amid the vulnerable amid the suffering where God's love is never more real.