

Sunday, July 10, 2016

Taking your faith to the next level (Maturing in Christ)

“Jesus Renews and So Can You”

Colossians 2: 6-15

John 13 – Jesus washes his disciples feet

1. Story of Renewal (Hook)

Good morning and welcome to the second sermon in our series on the book of Colossians. This morning, our sermon title is Jesus Renews and so Can you!

[SLIDE – LIBRARY CARD]

One of the over arching themes that we read in the Bible is this idea of renewal. But, what does renewal actually mean? I think the best example of renewal that I can think of in our modern context is the Library. One of the first things that I did when we first moved up to Prince George was that I got a library card. I LOVE the library, because you can get all sorts of books and resources on almost ANY topic. But the best part of the library for me is that you can RENEW your books. When I was growing up, if you wanted to renew a book, you’d have to go the librarian and fill out a paper card. Do you remember these little cards? Now it’s so high-tech. I can download an app onto my phone. If my library book is about to be due, I get an email sent to me the day before. AND if I want to renew my book, I no longer have to make a trip to the library. I can renew my book from the comfort of my couch. I press a few buttons, and voila, I can get an extension on my borrowing time for my book. Renewing at the library is east, fast and convenient.

However, when we begin to reflect about renewal of the scriptures, it's much deeper than just downloading an app onto our phones. Renewal as we read begins with Christ. And this concept of Renewal and what Paul has to say about it is what we'll discover together this week.

2. Review of Last Week

Last week we learned about Paul and his Pastor's heart and how he wrote to the church in Colossae. In his writing to the church, we were reminded that the church in Colossae at THAT time was a relatively young church. It was planted by one of the people that Paul had converted named Epaphras. And even though Paul had never visited the Colossian Church, he was writing to them as one of the Early Church leaders that had heard about them and cared deeply for them as they engaged their city.

In these early days of the church in Colossae, Paul was concerned for their well being because he had heard that in that city, there were many different teachings and philosophies that were influencing the church.

The teaching that influenced them the most was an early teaching of Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that everything that was considered "spiritual" was good and everything that was part of the physical world, or "matter" was considered evil. This kind of teaching was problematic because when it came to understanding who

Christ was as fully God and fully human at the same time, this teaching said that Christ was incompatible. How could God being “spiritual” who is good be also human, someone who was part of the physical world? Good and evil did NOT mix, like oil and water. These two substances were separate in their understanding, and because of these kinds of teachings, the church in Colossae were at odds with the Church’s doctrine.

The other thing that Paul was concerned about with regards to the influence of Gnostic teaching was that the Gnostics taught that salvation was only achieved through “secret knowledge”, thus making the teachings of Christ and membership into the church an exclusive thing. This of course did not coincide with the teachings of the church as the good news of the gospel, God sending his only Son, Jesus, for the sins of the world, was something that was given freely and out of love. Membership into the church was not something that could be “achieved” or “earned” through knowledge. It was readily available, a gift from God, that was given through grace, mercy and love.

And so in the first chapter of Colossians, we see Paul laying down his theology, his understanding of Christ. And this was important to the church to be reminded of the supremacy of Christ. Christ reigned supreme, not only IN the church, but he did so as well in the world. Everything in the world was created for Him and in Him, and this reminder to the church was given so that they would not rely on the

teachings of mere humans but instead, they were to put their faith in Christ, because what He had done for us on the cross.

3. Being Alive in Christ

This understanding and this theology, often times becomes dry for us, the modern listener. We begin to hear about these large theological ideas, but at the very end of the day, we say, how does this affect my life? How can I take this information and use it so that I can live it out through my own faith? These kinds of questions are huge! Because we must wrestle with them, so that we EVERYONE can be ALIVE in Christ!

As Paul begins to lay out the heart of his understanding of the gospel, we see that his theology extends beyond just studying the words, but it also involves calling out the Church in Colossae to live out their faith. But what does living out our faith look like? And what does living out their faith look for the Colossian Church?

At first, Paul writes some things that when read out of context seem utterly confusing for all of us.

Paul warns the church ***“⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.” Colossians 2:8***

But what does this mean? Why does Paul write this? Paul is concerned with the church’s understanding of what it means to be a Christian in that there was a temptation to look at the teachings and doctrines and boil it down to a set of rules to be followed. If you go to church, if you pray, if you do good works for the sake of doing good works, then you will earn your salvation.

NT Wright suggests that the “deceptive philosophy” that Paul is referring to is Judaism. Judaism in the early church’s day looked very much like following rules. But in following rules, followers of this kind of religion or “philosophy” relied on their own strength. As Paul says, they relied on human tradition and elemental spiritual forces. And all of these things were human made. Paul was arguing for something deeper and much fuller than just rules. Paul was pleading with the Early Church to not put their faith in rules that would try to “earn them salvation”. Paul was pleading with the Early Church to not forget their first love, which is Jesus Christ.

Circumcision and Baptism

In placing their faith in Jesus Christ, Paul was reminding the Church in Colossae that it is in Christ that the Church has been brought into fullness. One of the traditions that was practiced in Judaism was circumcision. If you remember, Abraham was commanded to circumcise himself and all of his male decedents as a SYMBOL of the covenant between God and himself. And if anyone would not be circumcised, then they would be cut out of the covenant and that they wouldn't be part of HIS people. Paul was arguing that the covenant between God and the Church carries on. He writes, that

“In him, you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Colossians 2: 11-12

Here, Paul reminds the church of their own baptism. Baptism is MUCH MORE than just a tradition or an act that we do as the church. Partaking in Baptism means that we become part of the family of God. We are not alone in this process. We have the Holy Spirit that was promised by Christ to lead and guide us. As Christians, we also have the community of faith, the congregation. NT Wright argues that being placed in the family of God is not just an invisible group of people, but the family of God is the best possible place to be if we are to mature in our faith. So, when we read this passage, we are encouraged to continue growing in the faith.

As well, Paul writes about baptism to remind his readers of the symbolism that it holds. He compares circumcision with baptism, reminding his readers that it is in baptism that a person is included in the God's family. He says that in baptism you are "buried with Christ", which is symbolic and not literal. The symbolism of the baptismal waters is that a person is buried and then raised from out of the waters. Your old life therefore is symbolically buried and a NEW LIFE begins when being raised out of the water.

There is a sense of RENEWAL when that happens. As Paul writes, this renewal happens through a person's FAITH and all of this renewal happens because of what God has done. Like how God raised Christ from the dead, in the same way we are raised from the dead as well. It is through Jesus that we are renewed.

4. Growing in Faith

In his writing to the church, Paul calls out some of the practices that need to be changed if a community is to grow in faith. In chapter 2 vs. 16 – 23 , he warns the Church in the practicing of their faith that no one be allowed to judge them with regards to what they eat or drink as well as with regard to religious festivals. The warning extends to more than just food and drink but also to other traditions like the New Moon celebration or the Sabbath day. Both of these references to religious

activities point towards Judaism. Judaism held all of these things in very high regard.

A Shadow of Things to Come

The question then becomes, why does Paul include this statement regarding religious ceremonies? Is it because religious ceremonies were bad? No! Actually, these ceremonies that were in place held a deeper meaning than just going through the motions of celebrating. It was because all of these religious ceremonies, were a shadow of things to come. What he's saying is that all of these religious activities were a shadow or an indication of Christ. Paul was arguing that because Christ has already come, he has all ready fulfilled these things!

A2 Wedding

It's like preparing for your wedding day. I remember when Alli and I were preparing for our wedding day, the planning took place more than a year in advance. We had to decide where the wedding was to be held. We had family and friends not only in Vancouver and Toronto, but we also had family friends coming from Montreal, Singapore, England and other places. We had to decide what the menu would be. We had to decide who be in our bridal party. The wedding day taught us about preparing and anticipation. But after the wedding happened, we didn't need to prepare anymore. It had arrived. We could begin our lives together. It was a new beginning, a new life together.

In the same way then, Paul is saying that we don't need to prepare anymore. All of these religious activities, they were designed so that we could prepare for Christ's coming! And now that he is here, we too have a new beginning. Our lives together with Christ can begin. There is a new beginning in Jesus.

Sabbath: A Shadow of Things to Come

In the case of the Sabbath, what was it foreshadowing about Christ?

Do you remember when Jesus Christ himself was challenged on the matter of the Sabbath Day? In Mark 3, Jesus was challenged because he healed on the Sabbath. If you'll recall, Jesus was at the Synagogue. And on that day, there was a man with a shrivelled hand. Jesus tells the man to stand up in front of everyone at the synagogue and he tells him to stretch out his hand. But before he actually heals the man, Jesus asks them a question. Jesus says

“Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”

You see the people who wanted to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, they cared more about keeping their laws than to actually practice out their faith. In the case of Jesus, they would have rather him send the man with the shrivelled hand away than to heal him. The scriptures tells us that Jesus was so distressed at their stubborn hearts, that he shows them how to properly live.

We also have to ask ourselves what the purpose of Sabbath really is. Sabbath as we all know is the “day of rest” and we take our cue from God himself in the book of Genesis. During the creation story we read that God created the Earth in six days and on the seventh day, he rested. Let’s pause and think about it. Almighty God, the one that is all powerful, even HE took time to rest, to enjoy creation and in essence, God modelled for us that although WORK is important, we are not SLAVES to work. We take the Sabbath to rest, to rejuvenate, to be RENEWED, so that we can continue on with the work that God has given to us.

In the same way, Christ demonstrates for us what the Sabbath really truly designed for. Sabbath was designed for rest, rejuvenation and RENEWAL as well. In the case where Jesus was challenged because he healed a man’s shrivelled hand, what did Christ model for us? Christ modelled RENEWAL. Jesus miraculously healed the man’s hand. The man could FINALLY use his hand again! But what Jesus gave to this man was much more than just performing a miracle. In healing the man’s hand, Jesus was giving the man a NEW LEASE on life. In healing this man’s hand, he now had the opportunity to go and WORK. He now had the use of both of his hands. It was on the Sabbath, the day of the week where RENEWAL was supposed to hand, that this man had a second chance in life.

New Moon Festival (Rosh Chodesh): A Shadow of things to Come

In Colossians 2, Paul writes about the New Moon Festival and the question for us is, , what was the New Moon Festival foreshadowing about Christ?

Paul writes, “¹⁶***Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.***”

Now we are all familiar with what the Sabbath day is. But what is the “New Moon celebration”? The New Moon celebration also known as ROSH CHODESH and it was an important festival in the ancient days. And the reason that it was an important festival was because it marked when the NEW MONTH began. Before there were calendars, smartphones with alarms and reminders, or GOOGLE Calendar, people would keep track of the dates by observing the moon. The month would begin when the sliver of the moon became visible after the dark of the moon. There would be designated observers that would watch the sky and once they made the observation that they could see that sliver the moon, they would report it to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin would then ask these observers all sorts of questions like (1) Where in the sky did the moon appear? (2) Which direction was the moon pointing? And if these observations could be verified by two independent witnesses, then the Sanhedrin would declare that it was the new month and messengers would be sent out to tell the people. After the declaration was made, the next day a festival would be held. At the festival, a prayer would be said as a blessing for the new month. The prayer begins with

"May it be Your will... that You renew this month for us for good and for blessing".

Rosh Chodesh or the New Month Festival was about asking God to RENEW the month for good and for blessing.

In the same way then, this was a foreshadowing of Christ coming to this world. Jesus' death and resurrection was about wiping the slate clean. Jesus died for our sins so that our sins could be forgiven. Our lives would be renewed and in that we have HOPE. Having our lives renewed by Christ as we join the body of Christ which is the church gives us a chance to grow and mature in our faith so that we can live out our lives TOGETHER!

False Humility and Worship of Angels

In Colossians 2 then, Paul goes back and he addresses what was going on in the church. He warns the church to be on guard for those who delight in false humility and the worship of angels. These were real things in the church back then. Paul even goes on and he gives examples of these kinds of people.

He writes, ***“¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹ They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.”***

Colossians 2: 18-19

Paul warns the Early Church that people like this, they become so wrapped up in their own self, that they become puffed up, that they’ve lost touch with the head (which is Jesus Christ). God wants the body of Christ to grow, to mature in the faith so that this faith can be lived out in a world that doesn’t know Christ. This new Genesis, this new beginning is meant so that a world that is broken CAN be healed. It is through Christ, causing the Church to mature in it’s faith, becomes the vehicle where the World can heal and reconcile with it’s Lord, who is Supreme over all.

Conclusion

Paul ends this chapter by once again reminding the early church by saying,

“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as through you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?”

These rules, Paul writes include

Do not handle!

Do not taste!

Do not touch!

All of these rules, Paul writes, keeps the Christian from “doing things” but it doesn’t change a person’s heart. Quoting from scriptures then, Paul writes,

“Such regulations, have an appearance of wisdom, with their self- imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” Colossians 2: 23

You see, the transformation of the Christ follower happens from the inside out. It begins with Christ transforming the heart. And then the actions follow.

In the practicing of rules, Paul argues it comes from a position of “don’t” “don’t” “don’t”.

Paul is reminding the church in Colossian and us that in Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit is a process. This process then has nothing to do with our human power or intellect. We cannot earn it.

5. The Church's Role

The Church's role then when we hear about all of these things is to recognize that we too must not pile on rules and regulations on ourselves and on others when it comes to the Christian faith. Like how Paul writes to the Colossian Church and warns about not allowing others to judge with regards to the New Moon festivals or with the Sabbath, we too must be aware to not do those kinds of things as well.

It's interesting when we read passages like this in the book of Colossians. Often times when I speak to those who are not Christ followers, their biggest problem with the church and with Christians in particular are these kinds of rules. I have heard many people complain about how the church is not accepting. Many people find it a turn off because in their church experience, they feel judged for the kind of lifestyle they are living.

As Paul addresses the Colossian Church, he is not pointing the finger at the unbeliever. Instead, Paul's main concern when he writes to the church is really ABOUT the church. Remember from our first lesson together? We read about how Paul was like a parent, someone who cared deeply for the church and wanted the best for the church? In the same way then, as we read this second chapter of Colossians, we too have to remember that Paul's hope for the church was that the church would learn to live and grow and mature, together as a community.

**Jesus washes the Disciples Feet: A lesson in maturing and understanding
Christ's mission to the world – to serve**

One of the greatest lessons that the disciples learned about Jesus' mission in the world came during the last supper. We're told that during the last supper, Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and began to wash his disciples' feet.

Can you imagine if you were one of Jesus' disciples? You had followed Jesus for the last three years, learning from him, walking with him, seeing him perform miracle after miracle, healing person after person. And then over dinner, right before the Passover, the person that you call Rabbi, Teacher, Master, Lord begins to do one of the most humiliating things, which is to wash his students' dirty, dirty feet.

If I were Peter, I would have reacted the same way. Like Peter, I would have told him, no way would Jesus be washing MY feet. But what was Jesus' response? Jesus says – if you don't let me do this, you have no part in me.

And the scriptures then tell us that after he was finished, he says to the disciples:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. ¹³ “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I

tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. John 13: 12 - 17

When we look towards the life and ministry of Jesus Christ we see that he ultimately calls us to be servants at heart. Jesus of course was their rabbi, teacher, master and Lord. But his leadership was quite different than anything the disciples had ever seen before. When the disciples recognized that Jesus was the Christ, the one that all of Israel was looking for, they expected that HE would lead them out of the oppression that was placed upon them from the Roman Empire. The disciples expected that Jesus would come like a white knight, freeing them by fighting the Roman Empire. But Jesus does the opposite, doesn't he? Instead of coming in like a general with an army, Jesus instead takes off his robes, wraps a towel around his waist and serves them. He does what a servant would do in those days and he washes their feet. And it was through this way that the disciples would go on, with the help of the Holy Spirit and they turned the world upside down!

Friends, when we begin to our practice our faith in this way, with a servant's attitude, then really truly, we can start to begin renewal to our broken world. We must ALWAYS look towards Christ's example to know how we can serve the world in order to point them to Christ's healing and renewing power. Remember, Jesus renews and through him, so can you!

The Revolution of the Mission

When I read the gospels, I'm often amazed at how the scriptures record the reactions of the disciples. More often than not the disciples never really seem to "get" what Jesus was trying to teach them. A quick example would be Jesus asking the disciples who he thought he was. Peter answered him quickly by saying that he was "the Christ". But later on in that passage in Mark chapter 8, Jesus begins to tell them about his death. And how does Peter react? Peter takes Jesus aside and he REBUKES him. And Jesus then in turns rebukes Peter by saying, "Get behind me SATAN!" Peter on the one hand recognizes that Jesus is the Christ but then fails to understand the purpose of Jesus' ministry on Earth. Peter misunderstand it SO MUCH that Jesus rebukes him, calling for Satan himself, the adversary to "get behind him" because he didn't want to be side tracked from what God the Father had asked him to do.

When we read just snippets of the disciples, we find that they are immature in their faith, and often I ask myself, how in the world did these uneducated fishermen turn the world upside down?

They did it, NOT of their own strength. I believe what's helpful for all of us to recognize that the disciples were all on a journey. They learned by being a community of followers of Jesus Christ himself.

In the same way, when Paul writes to the Church in Colossae, we find the exact same thing. When Paul writes the letter to the Colossians, he was writing to a community of faith that was also on a journey. They were learning together and growing together. They too were trying to find their way as a community of believers so that they could grow in their faith.

And so, it is the same for us as well. As a community of faith, as part of the body of Christ here at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, we too are on a journey together. We too are challenged to grow and mature in our faith. Often times we wonder how we can live out our lives, practice our faith and make an impact in our city.

When we read the book of Colossians then, we must remember that Jesus has already come to fulfill all of those things found in the Old Testament. He has come to bring renewal to our lives and to this world. And he did all of those things by being a servant leader. Like the disciples, we too must practice our faith in the same way.

Conclusion:

My friends, this is the challenge for all of us then. If you are already part of the fellowship here at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, we must take heed of these words and be intentional in growing and maturing in our faith together.

If you attend St. Giles' once in a while and you are looking to plug into the community here, I would encourage you to come and speak to Rev. Herb Hilder or one of the elders to get more information on how you can become more engaged with the congregation. If you don't know who the elders are, you can come speak to me any time and I'll point you in the right direction. And I can speak to this point personally. My family and I have made the conscious choice to be a part of the church community here at St. Giles'. And I'll let you in on a little secret. The people here are really nice!

If you're a visitor and you're part of your own church community, I encourage you to plug in, get plugged in and ultimately grow in your church. Remember, the church is the best place for you to mature in your walk with Christ.

And finally, if you are not part of any community, I encourage you to find out more. See who Christ really is and know that he loved you so much that he sacrificed himself, he died for your sins.

Friends, we are encouraged to grow in our faith. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit and within the community of believers, this can be achieved.

Amen.