

“Mail Call at Colossae: The Family Inheritance” (fn.:COLOSSIANS 1 1-14.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Colossians 1:1-14

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One of the experiences of the modern world—in a waiting room, in a line, even on a park bench—is to hear a stranger having a conversation on the phone. And you can listen in, without interfering and without having to participate. You hear only one side of the conversation and then to have imagine the other side of the conversation. And there is a sort of crazy appeal to this experience—you listen to one voice, imagine the other voice, and have a sort of safe separation from the conversation.

In much the same way, in today’s Scripture and for the next five Sundays, we are going to have a similar sort of experience—we will have the words of the Apostle Paul in a letter and we will have to intuit a bit on what the other side of the conversation is. So, let me invite you do that impolite thing—reading someone else’s’ mail—Paul’s letter to a congregation in the city of Colossae (present-day Turkey). Here are some things to know:

- Paul does not know this congregation, so his letter is a personal introduction. He wants to be a help to them...but he does not know them in person.
- Paul is known by reputation to this congregation—his ministry was well-known in the early church and right now they know Paul is in jail. So how’s a jailbird going to help them out?
- And third, the beloved leader of the Colossae congregation, a man by the name of Epaphras, is hanging out with Paul, so maybe the jailbird is trustworthy.

Listen now the opening words of the letter to Colossians—words that follow the standard letter address in a first-century correspondence—naming the sender, naming the receiver, and the salutation.

Colossians 1:1-14 (in sections)

<i>¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,</i>	[the sender]
<i>²To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:</i>	[the recipients]
<i>Grace to you and peace from God our Father.</i>	[the salutation]

While there are multiple themes here—Paul is an “apostle by the will of God,” the church members are all “saints” (even if they don’t act that way), they are “in Christ,” etc.—I invite you to note that Paul emphasizes the family relationship. First, the family relationship is seen in a horizontal way: he is their brother; they are his siblings (his brothers and sisters). He does NOT know them by name; but he knows them as family.

Family—I don’t know about your family, but my family does not always get along...but we are still family. We do not vote the same way on election day, but we do NOT vote anyone out of the family. So, even in this congregation in Colossae, to whom Paul is a stranger, he is family to them and vice versa. He writes as their brother.

And note also that Paul emphasizes the family relationship in a vertical way—grace and peace comes from “God, our Father.” Note the pronoun “our”—Paul shares the same vertical relationship to

God as “father.” I suspect we have heard this connection so often that we forget how radical this statement is. God is in relationship to us as father is to a child.

Last Sunday, Meredith helped us engage in the doctrine of the Trinity—those traditional words of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” One of the key takeaways of this mysterious doctrine of God—the three in one—is that relationship is the very nature of God. So, let me add another metaphor to the understanding of the Trinity: What we know of atomic science today tells us that the atom, the elemental building block of all matter, is the relationship between particles called protons, neutrons, and electrons. There is no atom without the relationships between the particles...and breaking of the relationship creates destructive actions, what we call the atomic bomb. The atom is defined by relationships. There is no atom without relationships.

God is relational in God’s self—that’s what we mean by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But more than that: God is relational to us. So, the Apostle Paul has this salutation of grace and peace from “God, our Father.” Paul reminds the church in Colossae: We are in that Godly relationship. God chooses to include us in God’s very being.

Beyond the sender, the receiver, and the salutation, the next step in the first-century letter is a thanksgiving to God. While the usual thanksgiving was short and perfunctory, Paul expanded the thanksgiving as a way to engage his recipients. Indeed, you will hear the familiar Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love.

³ In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ for we have heard of 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. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel⁶ that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. ⁷ This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, ⁸ and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

When it comes to the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love, noteworthy here is that faith and love are dependent on hope. Indeed, hope will be a key theme of Paul’s letter to Colossae. In Paul’s correspondence with another congregation—the conflicted congregation in Corinth—the Apostle Paul had to lift up love as the primary virtue—remember his words about love in 1 Corinthians 13 (“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels...the greatest of these is love”). However, here in Colossae, the primary issue centers on hope: faith and love come out of hope. And why would Paul dwell on hope? This suggests an issue in that congregation—what does hope look like? We will come back to this theme over and over again this summer as we work our way through this letter.

But moving on through the thanksgiving, we have the following:

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard it, 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, ¹⁰ 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 grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Again, there are many elements we could pursue, but here is the main thread of today's sermon—Paul declares we share in “the inheritance of the saints.” As family, we are in the will! Inheritances are funny things—they have the potential for the fullness of life AND for the biggest squabbles in families! But our family inheritance has a way of making us who we are.

By and large, an inheritance—the bequest in a will—depends solely on the giver...not the receiver. In other words, grace is still determinative, not our deserving. At the root, an inheritance is the choice of the giver, based on the relationship, not the deserving of the recipients.

One of my favorite preachers, a minister by the name of Fred Craddock, told a marvelous story about inheritance (and I resonate with the story so much that some of you have heard it before). Craddock told of vacationing here in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee. While eating in a mountain inn, an old man struck up a conversation with him. When the old man found out that Craddock was a preacher, he said to him, “I got a story about a preacher.” And this is what he said to Fred Craddock:

I was born back here in these mountains. My mother was not married and she had me as a child. The children at the school had a name for me—me not having a daddy—and it hurt when they called me that word, that word for a child without a father. During recess, I would hide in the shrubs and weeds until the bell rang. I ate lunch by myself. When I went to town with my mother, people would stare at her and then me, trying to figure out who was my father.

A painful time...about the seventh or eighth grade, I started to go hear a preacher. He frightened me in a way and attracted me in another way. He had face that looked like it had been dug out of rock. He thundered when he spoke. Even though I went to worship, I was afraid people would say, “What’s a boy like you doing in church?” So I went in time for the sermon and rushed out afterwards before anyone would have a chance to speak to me.

One Sunday, however, some women got to talking in the aisle and I couldn’t get by them to the door. I began to sweat and get cold, wondering “Oh, oh, somebody’s going to speak to me and say: ‘What’s a boy like you doing in church?’” I felt a hand on my shoulder and out of the corner of my eye, I saw that face—the minister. The minister looked directly at me and stared at me. I knew he was going to guess who I was.

He said to me, “Well, son, you’re a child of...you’re a child of...Ah, wait—you’re a child of God. I see a strikin’ resemblance in your face.” With a swat to my bottom, the preacher said to me: “Go out and claim your inheritance.”

“You’re a child of God. Go out and claim your inheritance.” When Fred Craddock heard this story, he asked the old man, who was talking, what his name was. The old man said, “Ben Hooper.” Ben Hooper? Ben Hooper! Fred Craddock remembered his own father telling of how the people of Tennessee had elected two times a governor named Ben Hooper, a man who didn’t have a daddy, who was called “illegitimate” if not worse. A child of God who went out to claim his inheritance!¹

Hear again Paul’s words of encouragement to this congregation in Colossae: Paul, their brother, reminds them that God, their (and his) Father, has enabled them all to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. When you are part of the family, you are in the will...in God’s will. Go out and claim your inheritance. Thanks be to God.

¹ Multiple versions of this story can be found on the Internet but it can be found in close to this form in Fred Craddock’s *Craddock Stories* (Chalice Press, 2001), pages 156-157.