

“Mail Call at Colossae: Going together like ‘peas and carrots’”  
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Scripture: Colossians 1:15-23

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A few years back, the author Dan Brown made religious news with his book *The Da Vinci Code*—over 80 million copies of the book sold, multiple translations into other languages, and a movie. And many took seriously this fiction in the novel: That in 325 A.D., church leaders voted to make Jesus divine...that the earliest Christians did not consider Jesus to be divine before then. What is surprising is how many people took this assertion as fact (along with assertions that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and so forth). I am intrigued by this acceptance of this “fact,” without looking at the earliest expressions of Christianity in the New Testament (and by the way, all of those so-called “lost gospels” are much later than the New Testament).

So let’s turn to the first generation of Christians, to the first-century A.D., rather than 325 A.D., to a portion of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae. There is a consensus among Biblical scholars that the initial part of this reading is a quotation of one of the earliest hymns of the church. It is a hymn to the cosmic Christ, similar to the Old Testament expressions about “cosmic Wisdom.” Perhaps you will find, as I do—I am not sure how much more divine of a declaration can be made about Jesus than this. But you be the judge:

Speaking of Jesus Christ, Paul writes (Colossians 1:15-21): <sup>15</sup> *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;* <sup>16</sup> *for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.* <sup>17</sup> *He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* <sup>18</sup> *He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.* <sup>19</sup> *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* <sup>20</sup> *and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

At this point the quotation of the hymn ends, the Apostle Paul continues with the following implications for the recipients of the letter (Colossians 1:21-23):

<sup>21</sup> *And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,* <sup>22</sup> *he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—* <sup>23</sup> *provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.*

As I noted last week, reading a letter is like hearing one side of phone conversation. You hear one voice and you have to imagine what the other voice is saying. In other words, beyond what this passage says about Christ Jesus, we ask: Why did Paul need to say this? So here are the two questions for the sermon:

1. What does Paul say about Christ Jesus?
2. What need in the recipients was Paul addressing?

So, I invite you hang with me for some basic understanding of what Paul says before moving into why it might have been important to those in Colossae...and important to us, their descendents in the faith.

Here is the shortest way I can summarize what Paul was saying—two familiar words: “Christ Jesus” or “Jesus Christ.” The word “Christ” is simply the Greek word for “Anointed” or “Messiah” in Hebrew. In some ways, it is a job description (“Christ” is not Jesus’ last name). The word “Jesus” is a proper name (the Hebrew equivalent is “Joshua”). Hispanic culture has continued the use of “Jesus” as a proper name. English speakers have generally not adopted the use of the name “Jesus.”

So, to say “Jesus” as Paul meant it...Jesus was a particular human, who died on a cross and was buried, but who did not stay in the tomb. Jesus was one man—an absolute individual. The Jewish professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University, Amy-Jill Levine, has written extensively about Jesus, the Jewish man of his time and era. Her most recent book, *Jesus for Everyone: Not Just Christians*, is a caring and careful look at Jesus...without the “Christ.” She shows appreciation for the man Jesus.

But to say “Christ,” as Paul meant it, is to speak of the divine presence of God: God with us, above us, and in us. What makes Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* so laughable (if it weren’t that people took him seriously) is that to say “Christ” is to speak of divinity—that’s how Paul understood it! Listen again: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” That’s what Paul means by “Christ.”

So this shorthand phrase—either Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus—carries the weight of humanity AND divinity. And we can err if we focus too closely on Jesus—he was just a good teacher, no more. And we can err, if we focus too closely on Christ—the divine being, the Son of God, and so on. Here’s an extreme example: one of the governing tenets of Christian Nazis in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s was that Jesus was NOT Jewish because he was the Son of God! As God’s Son, so the thought went, he was above the racial stain of Judaism. He was the cosmic Christ, above ethnicity! How ludicrous...and yet how accepted was that explanation by smart, educated people!

The Apostle Paul walks a tight rope here in his letter to the Colossians: the man Jesus is the Christ, the divine reflection of God, who has the fullness of God, through whom all things were created, and in whom all things come together. The “allness” of Christ is declared over and over again here. At the same time, this is Jesus, whose fleshly body bled and died. Paul will not have anything to do with any minimizing of Jesus’ humanity. Jesus did not “pass away.” His soul did not flit away to heaven. He died and was buried. Jesus did not have opioids to protect him from the pain. His victory came through vulnerability, not through his power and might.

Later in July, I am going to spend an evening in conversation about the work of Brené Brown (her TED talk has gone viral; she has a special on Netflix, and a slew of bestselling books). The theme she repeatedly turns to is that vulnerability is the key to a life well-led—NOT the mere possibility of being hurt BUT the very reality that the hurting way is the only way to live life. The Reformer Martin Luther said much the same in another way. Luther said that we keep looking for the right-handed power of God but what we get in Jesus is the left-handed power of God (my apologies to all the left-handed people). What Luther meant was the right-handed power of God is might, strength, force; but the left-handed power of God is vulnerability, weakness, and humility. And Jesus is the left-handed power of God!

Paul holds in tension the following: the cosmic Christ who is all in all, and Jesus, the broken, Jewish man of the first century. Two words: Christ Jesus or Jesus Christ. In the wisdom of Forest Gump,

they go together “like peas and carrots.” Forest Gump meant that peas and carrots are fine apart, but they are really meant to go together.

Ok, it is one thing to have the correct belief...but what does it mean? Why would Paul have to emphasize the cosmic Christ and the finite, mortal Jesus? With some awareness of probability rather than certainty, we could go with the following: Paul is addressing (1) an incomplete knowledge and (2) an incomplete spirituality.

We live in a world that trusts in incomplete knowledge that we can understand, that we can comprehend. While I have picked at Dan Brown repeatedly in this sermon, the appeal of his fiction is that it gives us a knowledge that we can understand—that the church is terrible institution, that sex is always in the middle of everything, and that the world moves by human scheming. It confirms fears and anxieties.

Paul’s cosmic Christ is the reminder that everything in this world is infused with Christ—the gay Pride Parade, the ranting tweets from the White House, the addiction to opioids, the beauty of sunset, the immigrant children in cages. We cannot give up on anyone or anything because Christ is in the middle of it. We live with mystery of Christ’s presence—the presence of God in all things—even in what is most challenging and destructive. So we keep pushing back on being satisfied with incomplete knowledge that simply feeds our fears and anxieties.

We also push back against incomplete spirituality. We live in a world that can quickly over-spiritualize. Paul’s earthly Jesus bleeds and dies. Jesus embraces humanity, the flesh, the body, the material. We cannot move to the dualism that only values the soul and ignores the tangible and real.

One of the evangelists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Billy Sunday, was known for saying that the best thing that could happen to a person was to get saved at a crusade and walk out the door and get hit by a Mack truck...and then wing your way to heaven. Get saved...have no chance of back sliding...and then no longer dealing with the messiness of life. To “over-spiritualize” is to put on blinders and not see the importance and meaning of embodied life. And it has not just been people like Billy Sunday, whose evangelical fervor bordered on fanaticism, which leads to the minimizing of embodied life. We educated Presbyterians have some skeletons in our closet on this one as well.

Leading up to the American Civil War, many, many Presbyterians in the South were pro-slavery. Slaves were considered a legitimate form of property. We treated human beings as property to be used and dispensed with—much like we do with our cars. You use the phone, you maintain the phone, sometimes you love your phone, but you do end up junking the phone in the end. How many phones over 25 years old are still being used? You used the slave, even loved the slave, but you still ended up junking the property...junking the person.

How did educated, faithful Presbyterians come to this conclusion—that slaves were property, not equal human beings in the sight of God and in society? We came up with the doctrine of the “spirituality of the church.” Spirituality of the church—the church is concerned about matters of the soul and spirit, not politics, not economics, not science. Spirituality was our business AND our only business. And as right as that sounds, it led to the following observation and conclusion: Slaves were bought and sold; there were market places for buying and selling; and the Supreme Court had recognized the property rights of slave owners. Buying and selling...property rights—that’s

economics...not spirituality. We Presbyterians avoided the shame of slavery by hiding in the spirituality of the church. Slavery was a matter solely for economics, not spirituality.

Paul's high understanding of Jesus gives us no place to hide, to be disconnected from each other. Jesus embodied humanity...all of humanity. Perhaps you know that Christmas song, often attributed to James Taylor, but actually the lyrics came from a woman named Wilha Hutson, an Episcopalian organist and choirmaster. She wrote about the baby Jesus:

Some children see Him lily white—  
The baby Jesus born this night...  
Some children see Him bronzed and brown—  
The Lord of heaven to earth come down...  
Some children see Him almond-eyed—  
This Savior whom we kneel beside...  
The children in each different place  
Will see the baby Jesus' face  
Like theirs, but bright with heavenly grace  
And filled with holy light.<sup>1</sup>

Each time we say Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus, we acknowledge the cosmic presence of God in the man named Jesus. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/some\\_children\\_see\\_him\\_lily\\_white](https://hymnary.org/text/some_children_see_him_lily_white)