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Colossians 1: 3-14

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Hope Producing Hope”

Most of my sermon writing happens at home where I’m able to focus on the task. The other day I was getting ready for a writing session on today’s preaching when my wife, Kelly, as she was leaving the house for her work, said to me, “Before you get started, can you water the flowers in the front of the house? I got the ones out back,” she said, “but I didn’t get around to the front. The big flower pots need some water.” I responded a little too quickly perhaps, “I think it’s supposed to rain sometime today.” I’ll just say it out loud this morning. I really didn’t want to water the flowers. “Well, we can’t be sure of the rain,” she said. “I’d really appreciate it if you’d take care of the flowers in the front.” That was the end of the discussion, if you know what I mean. And so, before I began my sermon work I did the watering work, and she was right. The flowers definitely looked like needed a drink. Most things that are beautiful and pleasing require intentional care in order to have them turn out that way. After the gardening, I sat down to reflect on the scripture for this morning it was more than coincidental that I noticed, again, how the words of Paul’s writing reflect the metaphor of nurturing things that grow. He writes in the opening section, as we’ve heard it read today, “you bear fruit in every good work as you grow in the knowledge of God.” (Col. 1:10) Paul observes how a commitment to Jesus has emerged in the life of the early Christians and that commitment he says, “is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world...” (Col. 1:6) There are some key ideas here worth observing. First, Paul’s theology is grounded in the certainty that God is active in our lives. Jesus taught our relationship with God is like soil in which the seeds of faith are planted. In a similar way, Paul teaches God begins something in us and then what God plants begins to grow in us. This work of God is nurtured and then it flourishes, and then it produces what he calls “fruit.” Notice the character of faith, according to the apostle. For Paul, faith is a changing and deepening experience. This means faith is not a mental concept. Faith is not a list of beliefs that we agree to. Faith is not following religious law or behaving in certain ways. To make the point even more strongly, faith is more than acknowledging Jesus lived, died and rose again. Faith is both a way of life and a force in life. It grows. It sends down roots. Faith spreads out and moves deeper. Faith produces results in our lives and the evidence of a living faith is something we see and celebrate. My morning chore of watering the flowers is a reminder that God is growing fruit in us. As we gather on a summer Sunday in the midst of the growing season, I can’t think of a better focus for us than to name the fruit God intends to produce by way of our shared life in Christ.

In another place in scripture, Paul writes to the early Christians about what he calls the fruits of the Spirit. In his letter to the Galatians there is a list of spiritual fruit that includes love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. (Gal. 5: 22-23) This is a clear example of what we’ve noted earlier, Paul’s belief that God is working in us and we can see the evidence of that. I’m reminded of the hymn we sometimes sing, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” The world isn’t convinced we are Christ followers simply because we say it is so. No, they’ll know we Christians by our love and we can easily add verses to the song by singing, “They will know we are Christians by our joy, and by the peace we share, and by our decisions to be patient and kind.” We might notice that in Paul’s Galatian list of the fruits of Spirit there is one fruit he doesn’t name but it is a fruit central to what he writes to the Colossians. That fruit is hope. They will know we are Christians because we hope. This is a fruit the church needs now more than ever. It’s a fruit the world needs. When hope is present all of the others seeds planted by God have a chance to grow and thrive. We are not defeated when we have hope. We are not overcome by discouragement, we are not weighed down by despair when we hope. And the beautiful thing about hope, Paul writes, is that it multiplies more and more. Hope spreads from us and into the world.

With our focus on fruit this morning I’m thinking of one of my favorite summer staples, watermelon. Some folks have a “take-it-or-leave-it” approach to watermelon and I can’t understand that. I love it, especially when it’s good. You see, that’s the thing about watermelon, there’s no guarantee. Sometimes it’s wonderful and sometimes it’s far less than that. The challenging thing about watermelon is you can’t tell by just looking. I’ve seen people thump it, smell it, gently toss it up and down in their hands trying to tell if that particular watermelon will be juicy and sweet. I’ve had plenty of experiences where the fruit looks gorgeous and thumps great and promises to meet expectations but when you taste it it’s spongy and flat. Just a couple of days ago I bought a watermelon and went through the same routine of testing and then hoped for the best. We cooled it down in the fridge, because it’s meant to be eaten cold. Then, I cut it open and started to junk it up, and I looked at it and said to myself, “I hope this tastes as good as it looks.” I hit the watermelon jackpot that day because it did. That watermelon was full of flavor, cold and refreshing. There’s nothing better than when your hope is fulfilled.

Paul writes to the Colossians telling them God is growing the fruit of hope in them but like with any watermelon, there’s no guarantee. There was a situation in the Colossian congregation that worked against a good

outcome. The early believers had received the gospel message of God's love and Christ's resurrection power. This gave them new life and a powerful witness but some within the church were second guessing the good news. Instead of producing hope some were sowing seeds of doubt. The promises of God aren't enough, they said. The gift of Christ's love can't be counted on, they taught. This counter message insisted the Colossians increase the purity of their lives and clean up their lives' record so God would have no choice but to include them in God's love. In essence, some in the church were putting conditions on God's unconditional love. Paul throws all of that to the side. We can trust what God has done, he says. We are loved and we are included and we are given a message of redeeming grace to share with the world. We aren't motivated by a fear we will fail. We have incredible hope because what God has done in Christ is enough. Our task, according to Paul, isn't to sow seeds of doubt in the world but to share the good news that God loves the world. Our hope produces hope, and if the church does something different than this it has missed the opportunity to produce the beautiful and nurturing fruit of faith in the lives of others.

Sometimes, persons of faith still wonder if the good news is too good to be true. We question it ourselves and our judgements toward others can make them question it, too. The seeds of love God plants within us are intended to increase our confidence and hope, not diminish them. I mentioned the flower watering event when I started to write this sermon, when I was finishing up the message another event occurred. Yesterday, as I was finalizing the preaching, I started to receive emails and texts from folks in the congregation who received what looked like an email from me asking for help, but it was bogus. So, if any of you received something from me asking for you to do me a favor, please disregard that. The scammers can be pretty savvy these days. The point is, Paul challenges any message wrapped in what appears to be authentic faith if it questions God's indisputable love for us in Jesus. "Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness." We don't have to behave in a perfect way. We don't have to achieve in order to impress. We don't have to fearfully wonder if we'll meet God's criteria. That kind of gospel message is bogus. Our hope is in Christ. Period. So, today and tomorrow, and in all the days that follow, we can live trusting God's love for us. Imagine how hopeful each day will be when we build our lives on this truth. Today, tomorrow, and in all the days that follow, we can live encouraging others to trust God's love for them. Imagine the seeds of hope we will plant in the lives of those who are around us. May the harvest be plentiful.