

SPG#137, Pentecost 9C

August 5, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Hosea 11:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

In our lives in the church we are accustomed to kind of a dual citizenship. We are accustomed to a certain routine of getting up, of eating meals, of watching TV, of being online, of going to work, of coming home, of working in the house or in the yard. But in our lives at St. Paul's we are also accustomed to witnessing fantastic events and spiritual occurrences via the scripture and via the practice of our faith in this church.

And yet, in the church, we use terms that point to realities beyond ourselves all the time.

When we partake of the Eucharist, we are not simply eating a meal in memory of Jesus, we are claiming to partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. But if someone asked, "How is that possible?" we would admit to a certain level of mystery. If we were to catalogue the terms that we regularly use in the church that have to do with what is beyond us, what cannot be explained in human terms, I think we would be surprised.

Then we would see that our Christian lives are surrounded by fantastic images and stories, of people being miraculously healed, of bushes on fire but not consumed, of voices from heaven.

But, on the other hand, we are citizens in a world that is skeptical of such things. We are part of a world that demands an explanation. So, as Christians we live in a dual citizenship, part of the church that shows fantastic images and tells fantastic stories, and part of the world that demands that everything be explicable.

When we leave church and go into the world out there in a job or at school, it is not common practice to speak of the fantastic things we witnessed on Sunday at church.

So at our job or at school we would not be referring to voices from heaven or blinding lights or someone going into heaven in a chariot of fire. And so, while we experience these fantastic spiritual occurrences, we are mostly secretive about these in our lives outside the church. And I think it goes without saying that we work to fit our secret spiritual lives into our everyday lives of work, school, and home. And while our secret spiritual life is part and parcel of all that we do, we seldom make conversation about it “out there.” And it probably goes without saying that we do not work as hard to fit our everyday lives into our spiritual lives.

In our “Journey Outward” group that meets on Sunday mornings, we are asking ourselves the question, “How obvious is it to people outside the church that I am a person of faith?”

In contrast, in the epistle reading for today from Colossians, the Apostle Paul is anything but secretive in using extraordinary language to talk about something extraordinary. To the followers of Christ who were gathered in the community of Colossae and to us he calls all to an astonishing integrity. He says that in regard to questionable behavior, questionable thinking, questionable leanings that we should get rid of such things in our lives. The examples he uses are: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. Further we should get rid of such things to the extent that we put them to death. So, again we see when referring to our relationship to Christ that extraordinary language is used to indicate an extraordinary relationship.

Yes, we are to resist being greedy, being dishonest. But somehow in our lives in Christ it is possible to have the goal to eliminate such things, to put them to death.

It is in this vein that he says in today's reading, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices, and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

In the language of faith then, Paul is able to challenge the reader to an extraordinary level of integrity. In the life of faith, in our relationship with Christ, we are able to envision a life where the old self with questionable behavior is not only resisted but put to death. And Paul does not stop there.

With the vision of the old self being stripped away, he challenges us to be clothed with a new self, a new self that is renewed by God. In that renewal, he says, "there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" With those words Paul ends the first half of today's epistle reading. If we go back to the first, we can see that the cadence of his words has gradually picked up to where at the end he proclaims "Christ is all and in all."

I will read for you the second part of today's reading: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

The reader can see and hear in Paul’s words that he is not verbalizing about some coldly objective phenomenon that can be scientifically described. Rather through the course of the whole reading there is a building of energy, a crescendo building up to a proclamation of inexplicable faith that occurs in the middle of the reading, “Christ is all and in all.”

So, when Paul uses terms like “putting to death what is questionable” or “stripping off the old self” or “being clothed with the new self, being clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love," he is inviting us to a full appreciation of those terms and what they mean. He is not inviting us into a theological debate where lengthy explanations are desired. He is appealing to that part of us that resonates with the warmth and delight of faith, the warmth and delight of knowing Christ. And yet, if we had not been worshipping together all this time, if we had no appreciation of the presence of Christ in our lives, if we had no appreciation for Paul’s use of fantastic terminology, then his words would seem curiously nonsensical and out of reach.

I think it is fair to say in general that the world has a bias against these kind of terms, or that language in Christ that seems to generate spiritual energy. And in that bias many who are not appreciative of Christ would relegate these terms and that energy to some type of anti-intellectual ecstatic experience that has more to do with unmet psychological needs than about the presence of Christ. But Christians who encounter these terms in scripture readings like this one, or in music, or prayer, we know different. We know that it is an encounter with Christ. We know that it is a celebration of his presence among us. The apostle Paul knew something of these spiritual dynamics. He knew that where there were followers of Christ reading this reading in Colossians that there would be an individual effect and a communal effect.

He knew that the individual hearts of followers would be moved as his words led them more into the warmth and delight of Christ. And he also knew that there would be the effect on all the readers or hearers as a group. He knew that in that encounter with Christ that divisions between the readers would tend to vanish. And there would be a oneness. Paul puts this oneness into words today when he says, "There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all and in all!" It is for certain that Paul hoped for this oneness in Christ among all the churches that he visited. It is for certain that he hoped for this oneness among all those who would read this scripture together. And so, it is not too much of a stretch to know that Paul hopes for this oneness for us here at St. Paul's. That the divisions between us would vanish. That we would be one in Christ. That Christ would be all and in all.

For us who are able to appreciate what Paul is saying, for us who are able to appreciate the warmth and delight of Christ, for us who can appreciate being one in Christ, for us, what has been accomplished in the name of Christ so far is not a surprise. And we are not daunted by difficulties and challenges in the present or of difficulties and challenges that are sure to come. We do not turn away from being clothed in love, clothed in Christ because we do not comprehend it. Rather we celebrate that we are so clothed, and it is our prayer that we would be so clothed more.

And we do not turn away from being one in Christ because we cannot explain it. Rather we celebrate our oneness, and it is our prayer that we would be more one in Christ.

And so to sum up, Paul calls us to an astonishing integrity in Christ. And beyond improving our behavior, he calls us to be new people in Christ. And implicitly he calls us to be open and bold about our faith in whatever setting we find ourselves.

May we have that astonishing integrity. May we have a new boldness of the spiritual life. May we be new people in Christ. Thank God that we are clothed in Christ. Thank God for our oneness in Christ. Thank God that Christ is all and in all. Amen.

