

Colossians 2:6-15
July 25, 2010

South Plains

The Scandal of Christianity

Every time Lindsay Lohan hiccups, television and the internet buzz with speculation about her addictions. Just the hint of a scandal can sell magazines and attract eyeballs to the internet. The church has its own problems with scandals, but the scandal I want to talk about today is neither salacious nor sexy. It has nothing to do with doping or spying or money laundering. Nevertheless, it is the Achilles heel of Christianity and has always been the place in the body of Christ most vulnerable to criticism. The scandal of Christianity is our loyalty to Jesus Christ.

What I mean by that is simple: the world around us is scandalized by the fact that Jesus is at the center of our worship, our values, and our mission. It is certainly good and necessary that we keep Jesus at the center of our faith. But, it continues to scandalize and turn off many who sit the margins of the church. When people say, "I'm a Christian, but I don't go to church," they often mean they like our moral values, but they don't want to worship a God revealed so narrowly in Jesus Christ. They may even like Jesus the man, admiring his love for others and following his teachings; but they don't want to call him "God."

Most of us are sympathetic to this kind of spirituality or attitude towards our faith because we value tolerance. One of the ways we try to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is to give people the benefit of the doubt whenever they express reservations about Jesus as the Christ, God in the flesh. Maybe with time, they'll recognize his divinity. Tolerance is one of the characteristics of Jesus himself in the stories we read from the Bible. He was not judgmental except where hatred and hypocrisy held sway.

The parables we heard today from Luke's gospel are stories of God's generosity. Jesus makes his point by assuming the generous impulses of his listeners. "Is there anyone among you," he asks rhetorically, "who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?" Come on people. If you know how to give good things to your children, you should know how much your heavenly Father wants to give good things to you. "Ask, and it will be given you." That's what prayer is about, calling on the grace and goodness of God.

But, why is Jesus himself so important? That's the question raised by some Christians in the Roman city of Colossae. Here's the story as best we can re-construct it. Not too many years after the resurrection of Jesus, a missionary by the name of Epaphras started a church in Colossae. Colossae was a cosmopolitan city in those days with a large Jewish population, lots of sophisticated Greeks and Romans, and a steady stream of merchants traveling back and forth between the far east and the

near east, their caravans loaded not only with spices and goods, but also with information about the larger world. It was not a big city, but it had many of the cultural advantages of the ancient world, not unlike Charlottesville. The little church sitting in this stew of humanity was healthy and sophisticated and strong enough that Epaphras had moved on to other cities.

Trouble arose from the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the place. The old Greek goddess Artemis still commanded respect. The excesses of paganism attracted some and motivated others to look for moral and spiritual guidance anywhere they could find it. The travelers from faraway places shared their religions freely. As a result, the Christians of Colossae had a veritable smorgasbord of religious ideas to choose from. Like some of us when we go to a first class buffet that's all you can eat, it was hard for those Christians to avoid sampling a little good looking paganism or tasting a popular superstition.

Some Christians, for example, reacted by insisting on self-abasement, regimens of humility in order to discipline their bodies for devotion to God. "Don't touch this. Don't touch that (see 2:21)." Others observed a calendar of festivals around the appearance of a new moon. All sorts of metaphysical theories and philosophies abounded, offering paths of devotion. It was easy to suppose that the Christian God may be sitting at the top of the mountain of religion, but that many

different religious paths all would lead eventually to salvation.

Enter the Apostle Paul. Paul was becoming a major influence among Christians across the Roman Empire since he had the unique combination of Jewish piety, the kind Jesus grew up knowing well, and Greco-Roman culture from a worldly education. This letter to the Colossians searches out the key beliefs of Christian faith. The goal of the letter is to shine the light of the gospel on life in Colossae so that the church can see the enormous chasm between what Christ offers and what other religious ideas could only suggest. Maybe, just maybe, if the Colossian Christians can see the importance of Jesus Christ, they will be less inclined to jump on the religious fads and spiritual foolishness of the city.

Two key points argue the superiority of Christ: first, we can face death with hope because Christ died and rose; and second, we can find forgiveness, again because of his death and resurrection.

Everybody has to face death at some point. There's no other way out of this world. We might succeed in ignoring the dangers of this world and pretending that we will never die. But, that strategy never works for long. A better way, according to this letter, faces death with the confidence that it is not a blind alley ending in nothingness. We believe that Jesus died for the sake of his message about God's loving kingdom.

He died bravely. His courageous crucifixion for a good cause makes his a good death. Most important is his resurrection, his appearances to his friends, his promises of new life, eternal life giving us not only an example of how to die, but more importantly we know how to live with hope in eternal life that conquers death.

Death is a pretty big deal. It's the end of all the opportunities we know about. One opportunity that ends with the last heart beat is the opportunity to forgive and be forgiven. I think it's fair to say that healthy human beings spend a lot of time dealing with guilt, feeling guilty for what we've done to others and forgiving what others have done to us.

You may have noticed a mountain of dirt at the end of our parking lot. Most of the excavated dirt has been trucked away. What is sitting in the parking lot is the dirt that will be used later to backfill around the new walls for the lower level of Kirk Hall. Guilt is like that pile of dirt. When we're feeling guilty, the wrong we have done sits like an ugly nuisance on the edge of our conscience. Eventually, we're not so aware of it much as you and I will eventually stop noticing that pile of dirt. But, like the dirt, guilt does not go away unless we do something about it. Forgiveness is God's way of hauling the dirt out of our lives. When we accept God's forgiveness in Christ, the guilt can be taken away.

Forgiveness that results in real reconciliation is a mysterious transaction. Some people want it and can't

get it. Others offer it and have it thrown back in their face. But, sometimes, sometimes grace prevails; and people who have hurt each other deeply are blessed with a forgiving spirit.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of Jesus' death on the cross. He died for our forgiveness. Reconciliation is believable because of his resurrection. "When you were dead in trespasses..., (Colossians 2:13-14) God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us." I cannot understand why God wanted to do it that way, requiring Jesus' death on the cross; but I'm glad to get the benefit of that forgiveness. I'm glad for the relief of knowing that my sins are not held against me in God's mind. I'm free of that guilt.

Forgiveness and life in the face of death. Those blessings are tied in the mind of God to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The token of those blessings is the prayer Jesus teaches to all who would follow him. It's a learned prayer. It doesn't come intuitively. There's little about the prayer that cannot be found elsewhere in scripture or perhaps gathered in pieces from other religions. The uniqueness of the Lord's Prayer is that it comes from the Lord Jesus. This prayer is grounded in a real person's life.

Ordinary people asked for this prayer and they learned it from the mouth of Jesus. Colossians 2:7 encourages us to be "rooted and built up in him." There

are two dogwoods growing along Angus Road. One tree is green; the other has brown leaves, curled in the heat and dying. The first tree is deeply rooted, steadily drawing moisture from the earth. For whatever reason, the second tree does not have roots spread deeply into the source of life. In times of drought, it withers and may already be dying. You and I need to be well rooted in Jesus Christ. It's the only way our faith can survive the scandal and indifference that will always mark Christians. And, it's the way of a forgiven life.

The letter to the church in Colossae could just as easily be addressed to the church in Albemarle or Fluvanna. Our need for confidence whenever we confront death and our everyday negotiations with a guilty conscience find an answer in Christ Jesus.

Since you have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, live in union with him. Keep your roots deep in him. (Col 2:6-7a)