

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

This is the third in a series of Letters that St Paul sent to the church in Colossae. In chapter one, Paul commended the Colossians for their faithful witness and, in chapter two, he warned them to beware of competing ideologies. In the reading that we heard today, he goes on to admonish them to embrace this new life in Christ. He begins, "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory."

The action word here is "IF" ... if we've been raised with Christ. The word "IF" can be one of the most daunting words in the English language. The implication here is that if we've been raised with Christ, what follows is meant for us but, if we haven't, then nothing that others say will make a difference. We need to continually ask ourselves whether we've been raised with Christ and that's the goal for us to strive toward. Striving for a new life in Christ comes down to two words which are CHOICE and RESPONSE.

First, God chooses us as one of his own and awakens us to God's presence by the power of the Holy Spirit. God claims us as one of his own and calls us to a high and noble purpose.

It's a common misconception that it's all up to us and that we're the ones who are supposed to take the first step. The scriptures teach us just the opposite. As we've heard, God called the people of Israel and set them apart from the other nations. God called the prophets and gave them their voice. Jesus called his disciples and made them part of

His kingdom. He reminded them when He said, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit".

God chooses us and that's the first step. But, once God claims us as his own, it's up to us to respond in faith and to say, as we heard in the Book of Samuel, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" "... or in Isaiah, when he said, "Here am I; send me!" or the father who begged Jesus to heal his sick child, and said "I believe; Help my unbelief!" God calls us and it's up to us to respond.

I've heard it said that, "God has many children, but no grandchildren." I can understand the saying because each of us must come to Christ in our own personal way because that's the moment that our new life in Christ begins.

So, Paul makes it clear to the Colossians when he says, "If you have been raised with Christ". But he doesn't stop there and goes on to add, "seek the things that are above."

As we heard a few weeks ago, the Colossians were subjected to the influence of heresy, idolatry and all kinds of sinful behavior and it's no different in the society of today. The world we live in is full of distorted images, violence and foul language. Just turn on the TV and we might think that we're living in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Fortunately, there's another reality - a reality of truth and beauty, kindness and virtue, graciousness, generosity and love. It depends on where we look. In his Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul wrote, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and

received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

I read a sermon that seems appropriate that was entitled, "Rubbing People the Right Way." The gist of the sermon was that, while we can always find fault in other people, we can also find the good. We can always criticize and find fault in others or we can complement others and build them up. We can discourage, or we can encourage. To encourage others is to rub them the right way.

The point was well taken, and the basis of it all is this: Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins and rose again that we might receive the gift of new life. Looking to Him, Jesus brings out the best in us and, as He does for us, we're able to bring out the best in others.

I read an old gospel song that goes:

Look for the beautiful, look for the true;
Look for the beautiful, life's journey thro'.
Seeking true loveliness, joy you will know,
As to the home above onward you go.

Now, St. Paul isn't about to stop there. And so, after telling the Colossians to look above to the new life in Christ, he warns them not to look down and not to revert back to their carnal nature. He says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." Just to make sure they get the point, he added a whole list of vices that the Colossians were guilty of when he warned them, "On account of these, the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive

language from your mouth." St. Paul could have gone further because, when it comes to all the possible ways that we're less than perfect, there is no limit. Even our best efforts to be righteous are often misdirected and fall short. If left to our own devices, there would be no hope. As St Paul told the Romans, "There is no one (who is) righteous; no, not one."

The Good News is that the God of Love looks upon God's less than perfect children and loves us anyway. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

I can imagine myself in a courtroom as the defendant and standing before the judge as he reads the charges against me. The judge considers the prosecutor's arguments and weighs the testimony of the witnesses, all of whom attest to my guilt. He then slams down the gavel and pronounces, "Not guilty." This is the miracle of God's grace and love for us. God counts us as righteous, even when we fall short. As Paul's liturgy reminds us, "But God proves his love for us in that, while we still were sinners, Christ died for us."

Just remember, God's grace came first. "We love because He first loved us." Only as we awaken to what God has already accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are we able to respond with gratitude and sing from our heart,

O victory in Jesus,
My Savior, forever.
He sought me and bought me
With His redeeming blood;
He loved me ere I knew Him

And all my love is due Him,
He plunged me to victory,
Beneath the cleansing flood.

The bottom line of God's amazing love is that we have no reason to boast as if a new life in Christ has anything to do with what we've done or deserve. Neither do we have reason to stand in judgment of others - as if they aren't good enough to make the cut. The gift of new life in Christ is inclusive of all those God calls and who are willing to respond and walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Paul makes it clear: In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

I'm sure that it got the attention of the people of Colossae when they saw that St. Paul had also included barbarians and Scythians in the Body of Christ. But who are the barbarians?

They're the people who society judges to be barbaric. The people of St. Paul's time thought of the barbarians as unclean and uncouth. They didn't wash their hands before they ate or brush their teeth before they went to bed. They hardly ever took a bath and would probably wear the same clothes, day after day. They're definitely NOT the kind of people who we're likely to invite over for tea. Unfortunately, history also tells us that the people of the late 1800's considered the Indigenes Peoples from the plains and Hawaii as barbarians because their Indigenes societies were different from their proper main stream "upper class societies". At times, I wonder how far we, as a society, have truly progressed from being judgmental of others.

And yet, St. Paul made no bones about it when he wrote, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and

uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" In Christ, there are no distinctions. "All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we ARE the church together."

Nowhere is this expressed more clearly than when we're invited every Sunday to the Communion Table. "They will come from East and West, North and South to gather at the table of our Lord."

Thanks be to the God who continues to love us despite our imperfections and Amen