

Colossians 1:3-8

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you have read Paul's letters from beginning to end you know that he follows a pattern. After he introduces himself and identifies those to whom he is writing, he usually offers what almost seems to be a spontaneous prayer of thanks giving. Then he gets into the reason that he was moved by the Holy Spirit to write the letter. He follows his usual pattern in his letter to the Colossians.

It seems that Colossae was not one of the places that Paul had done mission work in person. He knew some people who were a part of the congregation there, notably Philemon; but he had not founded the congregation there. It was founded by Epaphras who had likely taken the good news of the gospel to Colossae after he had learned it from Paul in Ephesus.

As Paul hears a report from Epaphras about the congregation in Colossae, before he addresses any problem issues that the congregation might be facing, he offers a prayer of thanks to God. What an example for us! It's so easy for us to look around and wonder "where are God's blessings" as we face struggles and temptations in our lives, and as we live in a time of recession and economic uncertainty. But, Paul teaches us today to offer prayers of thanks to God. No matter what the situation in our lives or in the world, we can thank God for the spread of the gospel, and for the fruit it bears in our lives.

Paul is probably writing this letter in the 50's AD. It had been only 20 years since Jesus ascended into heaven. When he left, there were 11 apostles and one congregation, a group of about 120 people who met in Jerusalem. God gave the church a pretty good jump start on Pentecost, using the sound of the mighty wind and the tongues of fire to gather a huge crowd to hear the good news of the Gospel and 3000 were baptized in one day. After the stoning of Stephen, God used the persecution of the church in Jerusalem to scatter many of the believers, who preached the good news of the gospel wherever they went. Then he appeared to the leader of the persecution, Saul, and brought him to faith. He called him to be the Apostle to the gentiles. Sent out by the first mostly Gentile congregation, the church in Antioch, Paul and those who went with him, preached the gospel throughout Turkey, and then, prompted by a vision from God, they preached the gospel in Macedonia and Greece. Although they were often persecuted—chased out of cities, jailed and even stoned—the good news of the gospel did not return empty. Congregations of believers were established everywhere they went. Paul gave praise and thanks to God that **all over the world this gospel was bearing fruit and growing.**

God used the apostle Paul in wonderful ways. Through his preaching about Jesus many people were brought to faith and many congregations were established. But Paul didn't think that it was all about him. He didn't look down on those congregations that weren't established through his preaching. In fact, when others who were preaching the gospel tried to advance themselves by deprecating Paul his response was, **what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.**

So it ought to be with us as well. As we think about where we were as a Synod in the 1960's, so small that others thought we wouldn't make it if we tried to go it alone, we can't help but offer prayers of thanks to God. We have been blessed by God to be able to preach the good news of the gospel in every state of this United States, and to do the same in many nations around the globe. Be sure that you make time in your prayers to give thanks to God that all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing. But not just through the WELS. We rejoice whenever the gospel is preached even by those who are not part of our fellowship.

Paul was especially thankful that, when Epaphras proclaimed **God's grace in all its truth** to the Colossians, it bore fruit among them. People were brought to faith in Jesus and a congregation of believers was formed in Colossae. Paul wants them to give thanks for and to continue to listen to Epaphras. He calls him a **faithful minister of Christ**.

Take a minute to think about all the people God has used in your life to bring you the message of God's grace in all its truth. Give thanks to God for faithful parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, pastors, Christian teachers either in public or Lutheran schools. God has used them to make sure you know the one thing needful, the gospel of Jesus. God has used them to strengthen you in the faith through God's word, to correct you when you were wrong, to bring you back when you were wandering away from God, to point out your sins and point you to Jesus for forgiveness. What a blessing it is that God brings people like Epaphras into our lives, people who are faithful servants of Christ, who hold God's grace in all its truth constantly before our eyes. Offer prayers of thanks to God for them.

What was the fruit the gospel was producing? First of all, the fruit of faith. Paul was giving thanks to God that through the preaching of the gospel people in Colossae had come to put their trust in Christ Jesus. They had come to recognize the foolishness of worshipping an idol. They had come to realize that there really is a God and that he demands perfection that no one can give him. They had come to realize that no matter how hard they tried, no matter how many good works they did, no matter how much money they had, they could not please God and they were deserving of God's eternal punishment. Then they learned that God did it all for them. He provided everything they needed through his Son, Jesus. Jesus provided the perfect life God demands. Jesus suffered the punishment we all deserve. They were moved by the Holy Spirit to forsake everything else and trust in Jesus alone for salvation and eternal life.

We don't have idol statues today, but we do have many things that easily become our idols—houses, cars, money, family members. We are constantly bombarded with temptations to make someone or something more important to us than God. We are constantly bombarded with messages that tell us to do our own thing, or that believing in God is foolish. Offer prayers of thanks to God every day that he has performed a miracle in you. He has enabled you to overcome this constant bombardment from Satan and the sinful world and to put your trust in Jesus alone; to believe that Jesus is the only way, truth and life. The gospel is producing the fruit of faith in your hearts.

Faith is the most important fruit of the gospel. Without faith in Jesus as your savior from sin, nothing else matters. Without faith in Jesus you would end up suffering for eternity in Hell. Faith in Jesus is most important but faith in Jesus is never alone. Along with faith there is always hope, the ability to look forward with confidence to what your eyes can't yet see. Hope sees the inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade that is kept safe for us in heaven. Hope is the longing to be with Jesus in a place where we no longer have to struggle against temptation, where there is no sickness, or pain.

As our faith in Jesus grows, strengthened by hearing God's gospel promises over and over and over again, our hope grows more and more certain, and love becomes more and more evident. Paul gives thanks to God that the Colossians are **showing love for all the saints**. Of the three, faith, hope and love, love is the most evident to others. Love is the fruit of the gospel that is most easily seen. In fact, in the series of readings we had from John's first epistle, we heard him say that if we don't love our brothers we can see, we can't love God. If there is faith in our hearts we will love God and our neighbor. If there is no love for God and our neighbor, then there is no faith. To rephrase the words of James, "faith without love is dead."

Epaphras had reported to Paul that the faith the Colossians had was expressing itself in love. One of the ways most often mentioned in the New Testament was that they were showing hospitality. It may be that when traveling preachers came to Colossae and spoke the truth, they welcomed them and provided for their needs. If fellow Christians came to Colossae fleeing from persecution, maybe one of the many persecutions that took place in Rome, they welcomed them, cared for their needs, gave them food and clothing and whatever else they could do, even risking their own property and lives by doing so. Maybe like the early Christians in Jerusalem they did all they could to care for those in need. But in some way, their love for God and for their neighbor was evident to all.

If Epaphras were among us today what would he report? Would he be able to report about the love we have for all the saints? I think he could report on a great spirit of generosity among us, how many are giving to the Lord in proportion to the way God has blessed them, and even beyond what might be expected. When someone is in need, many are generous to help. Compared to other congregations we have very few arguments and no one has threatened to sue because they didn't like the decision the majority made, as has happened in some congregations. Whenever something needs to be done, people volunteer their time and talents to get it done. Certainly, there is always room for improvement, but, like Paul, I offer prayers of thanks to God for the fruit I see the gospel producing among us. I hope you do so as well.

I pray that each of us will do what Luther encouraged, to look in the mirror each day and face our sins, confess them, and then go to the word and be assured of God's forgiveness in Jesus. When we do that every day, we will be moved to offer prayers of thanks to God that the good news of the gospel has spread throughout the world, that it has come to us and is producing the fruits of faith, hope and love in us and our fellow believers.