

10th Sunday after Pentecost

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Col. 3:1-11

Christ is All and in All

“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.” Here in the letter to Colossians, Paul quotes himself—in his earlier letter to the Galatians he has also told his readers that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Paul seemed to think that this proclamation of our human solidarity with one another in Christ is a good idea, and so he repeats it. Only here he builds on the mystical element that underlies this notion. We are one, bound together in the unity of Christ’s love and not divided by our distinctions, Paul says, because Christ is all and is in all.... Christ is in all—in each of us—in all things.... That’s heady stuff.

Colossians is a letter from the Pauline tradition. Most scholars think that it was written not by Paul, but by disciples of Paul who proclaim their theological commitments by appending Paul’s name to the letter. You get the idea in the way that the letter quotes Paul’s earlier text. But Colossians is a distinctly mystical take on Paul—picking up on particular themes in Paul’s writings. It begins with a great hymn to Jesus—he is “the image of the invisible God” in whom “all things were created,” we learned two weeks

ago. Then last week, we talked about being rooted in this Jesus in whom we were created. This mystical emphasis in Paul, what I would call an understanding of our metaphysical intimacy to Christ—that's just a fancy way to say that Jesus isn't simply a friend or a guide, but that our very being, the essence of us, is rooted in Jesus—this metaphysical intimacy will show up quite a bit in all that I preach in the coming years. It allows us to understand ourselves in relationship to God in a powerful and loving way.

But today I want to pick up on the ethical implications of this understanding. As the letter to the Colossian makes clear, to say that we are all rooted in Christ isn't just a warm, fuzzy idea. It doesn't simply deepen our piety or enrich our prayer life. It should, indeed, radically affect how we relate to one another. We have a unity with one another in Christ, the letter proclaims, and it is a unity grounded in love—that's what it is to say that we are rooted in Christ---it's that we're all, together, rooted in the outpouring of God's love. And if that's the case, then we must act towards each other out of this unity of love, and not out of the distinctions that divide us and pit us against one another. We are always, first and foremost, to see Christ in one another, and not age or skin color or gender---you know the list. This morning I want us to dwell on the ethical implications of this, and so I'm going to talk about illegal immigration—or should I say undocumented workers---that's the trick of it, isn't it. As soon as you name the issue, you've already taken a position. That's how quickly we get polarized.

Actually, I suppose I don't want to talk about illegal immigration today, and that's a part of my point. It seems to me that the question of undocumented workers is a political

question, and I certainly have political opinions, but I don't think they're that interesting. For example, I think that we should secure our borders, that we should be honest about our need of more labour than we American citizens can provide. We need to be sensitive to those who have been among us providing this labor, whatever their status, and we should also not reward unlawful behaviour.... See, it's not that interesting. Some of you, I'm guessing were wondering if I would preach political sermons, and as a general rule, I won't. My political opinions aren't that illuminating.... But please don't take that to mean that these kinds of issues won't ever come up in my preaching—they will. It's just that they'll come up as theological issues—as ethical issues. As issues of how we are to live most fully in a world whose life is hid with Christ in God.

So I don't want to talk about illegal immigration—the political question—but strangers in our midst—the theological question. Really, I guess what we've heard in Colossians challenges that question, as well—if in Christ our distinctions fade in the brightness of God's love, then are there strangers, or are there just brothers and sisters who we haven't known or embraced yet? That's the question that we have to deal with as a Christian community. It's a question not first of public policy, though it will always have implications for that which I don't always grasp. Rather, it's first a question of how we are in relationship with one another—how we care for another. What Colossians makes clear—what all of Jesus' teaching makes clear—is that we cannot draw the circle of that caring too narrowly.

The question of immigrant labor has raged across Northern Virginia, and my thoughts have been consistently drawn to the city of Herndon—not to the Council members who make laws concerning the fate of the day-laborers, but to the Churches who have worked as a coalition to help the strangers among them find a safe place to gather, to find work, to get a cup of hot coffee in the cold while the bigger political questions are sorted out. That, to me, is one dimension of what it means to recognize our unity in Christ. It means treating as a brother or sister the strangers among us—providing them the care that they need today, in this moment where love can be real—whatever might happen in the future around these issues.

Of course, it will also mean getting involved in the broader resolution of these issues—we haven't love our neighbors if we only love them for today—but I will say that the longer-term vision of the most loving action to take towards one another—the questions of how we most lovingly organize our society—are far murkier than the questions of today. If it's cold out, a cup of hot coffee is always and everywhere a loving act.

Having said that, it's also clear that for some, the strangers in our midst are those whose skin is brown and whose accents are thick—while for others the strangers are those whose opinions are conservative, or maybe liberal, and whose vision is nationally focused, or doesn't consider national interest enough. It is as easy to make aliens of one's political opponents as it is to treat as alien those who aren't native to our land. Indeed, in the US, we even had the trick of treating as alien those who were more native to our land than many of us were, but that's another sermon.

It's a challenge to truly live into our unity in Christ. It's even more challenging when we recognize that the letter to the Colossians speaks not just of the nice Jews and Greeks—the hard-working among the undocumented or the polite among the talk radio hosts. No, the letter is pretty unambiguous, that Christ is all and in all, which means that we also have to recognize and embrace our solidarity with the criminal and the hateful—to know that we are with them, as well, in Christ.

A last thought. I began talking about embracing the stranger among us with reference to the immigrant community that is under fire. I expanded my point to recognize our struggle to treat everyone around us with love and respect, but I don't want to let the first point get lost in the second. Yes, we are called to treat everyone with love and respect, but Scripture is clear that we are to take special care for the poor and powerless among us—for the widow and orphan, for refugees, whether they be political or economic. Liberation theologians call this God's "preferential option for the poor." This doesn't mean that God loves the poor the most—it's only that God is clear that in the turmoil of our society, those without power are the most vulnerable. They are those that need God's special attention, that need the special attention of God's servants, because they are those who the world will shunt aside or ignore. You could say, I suppose, that God, like the rest of us, roots for the underdog. But it goes deeper than that---it's that at the heart of God's love is compassion---it is a love that is grounded in God's suffering with us in our suffering. That's what we see in Jesus. So it is the vulnerable among us who most strongly evoke our compassion, whose suffering calls out for our love and care. What the

letter to the Colossians tells us is that when we hear that suffering call to us, we must respond; Christ's love in us must respond to Christ in the suffering, for Christ is all and in all. Amen.