

Psalm 85

Hosea 1:2-10

Luke 11:1-13

Colossians 2:6-19

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Backing up a bit to Hugh's reading of the Gospel - isn't it interesting that the week after we "finished" our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer the Gospel text from the liturgy is the Luke version of the Lord's Prayer and an expansion on it? We heard in the Gospel text how leisurely Jesus made reference to the prayer which we Christians hold so dear for centuries - and many scholars argued that the prayer was never intended to be made into a ritual act. Perhaps they feared what the author of this letter to the Colossians feared - that turning religious acts into traditions would take the followers further away from faith in a living God. If there is one thing that I have gleaned from a 5 week series on the Lord's Prayer it is that there is so much more behind each word and thought in what we have been saying almost by rote than what we can ever really glean out of it. For the words of prayer are living - just as our God is living - and with life comes newness and creativity.

One of the advantages to having a *human* savior is that with a person, there is the image of resourcefulness, inspiration, originality, spontaneity, and growth. Jesus was no dried up thought or principle - he was a human teacher and a guide - and with that he was always finding new ways to communicate his awareness of God with others. He would walk along where the people were and tell parables. Or he would stand in one place and preach spiritual truths, like the Beatitudes. He would often respond to those who were trying to trap him into a blasphemy by turning the tables and asking them questions in return, like when he was asked about whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes and he asked whose picture was on the coin.

A living Savior proves the point of there being a living God.

And that is what this scripture from Colossians is all about - warning the followers that God is real and in order to know this we need only to focus on the Savior Jesus and not get too carried away on ideas and thoughts and *vain speculation*. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ."

This is a warning to "keep things real." We can easily get so caught up in ritual and form and lose track of meaning. That is how it has often been, for example, when we recite the Lord's Prayer as a part of the ritual and forget to become aware of the simple truths that are conveyed behind each phrase in it.

Sometimes the greatest danger of faith is that some of our habits become more of a superstition than a true relationship with a living God whose foundation is unconditional love and mercy. We worry if we didn't do this or say that . . . that . . . that what? That bad luck will fall upon us? That God will stop loving us?

The truth is - life is full of challenges regardless of what we do or do not do and God *cannot* stop loving us - because God is love. And all God wants us to do is focus on that love and strive to spend time in that love with God and with others.

But one of the greatest challenges to humanity is our tendencies to stagnate. We seem to want to learn so much and then coast as long as possible on that information. We learn one way of doing something and that suffices. Why should we bother learning another way if our way works? It is efficient that way.

For example - we learn that to live happily ever after we need to read our bible, go to church and do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Perfect formula. Except that life doesn't always fit into that formula and we are thrown for a loop - life is always creating and taking divergent paths and humans have the capability of learning new things.

On the other hand, a problem with the diversity of life can be that sometimes, we can be too easily swayed by new and enticing ideas. Humans want a formula for life and at the same time - we don't want to be bored. And when one path stops working for us as we would hope, we can stray to another path. Our scriptures for today warn us of both of these sides to the human equation - our tendency to stagnate and our tendency to be easily distracted. In order to help us deal with this, we are asked to be mindful of the fact that Jesus was fully human and divine - calling us to stay grounded on the reality of this earth while we seek the power of God.

Focusing primarily on the image of the human Jesus as our spiritual guide is one way to avoid a division of loyalty. It is unifying to depend on the power of Christ alone, for Christ lived amongst us for us and at the same time was with God and guiding us to God. This Man of God and Man of the people lived and died so that all humanity would come to know that God is real and we can be a part of this holiness. It is a matter of trust - trusting that Jesus is all deity.

Once we know who this human was and what a role he plays in the development of humanity on this earth, let us think again about how that fits into our lives. We aren't to think of him as a magic potion - a superstition - a tool to use to get what we want out of life - for we would do no such thing to a fellow human - but we do know that a faith in Jesus does have some sort of power.

Going back to our Gospel for today, "And [Jesus] said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

What one seeks is what one finds. If our focus in life is things which give us momentary pleasure - if we seek EARTHLY self absorbed things alone, then that is all we will have, and we will find very quickly that those are things won't fulfill us for long. But if we seek lasting truths, love and a fulfilled creative life, then the God who came to us in human form will be able to be with us for that!

Prayer is a form of being with God - it is an act of requesting presence - spelled P R E S E N C E not P R E S E N T S. When we ask anything of God, we are acknowledging that God is real and alive and active in this moment. We are seeking union with God. And God loves us just the way we are - we need do nothing to prove it - no secret rituals or special knowledge, we need but trust in that awareness and live a life of faith.

The very first sentence of our scripture text reads, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Those last three words I believe are the key to a life in Christ - "abounding in thanksgiving." If we can practice a life of being thankful for what we have, we find ourselves being more aware of our own lives, those of others, and we become more aware of the life of Christ. Or ability to be aware of the reality of the whole world around us is often contingent upon us not only focusing on our wants.

The Lord's Prayer had a lot in it focusing on the self - give us daily bread, forgiveness us of our trespasses (or sins or debts), protecting us from evil . . . but there were also the points asking for God's will to be done on earth - very community minded that is - as well as asking for us to forgive others. Jesus encourages us in the Gospel reading to ask - to keep in touch - to continue to pray and seek and commune with and search for the powerful mystical being - but at the same time our scripture texts is saying - yea, ask but keep it real! Keep the focus on the human divine Jesus and don't get caught up in superstitious thinking.

AMEN