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## **Open Hearts, Open Minds: Back to the Future A Stewardship Meditation, Part I**

Colossians 1:11-20 May God strengthen you with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of God's people. 13 He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

I don't think I've told you about how I spent Thanksgiving my freshman year at TCU, Texas Christian University. For many years, a bunch of folks there had been doing a camping trip to Big Bend National Park, in the far corner of west Texas. This year those folks invited a few of us new freshmen to go. It seemed like a good idea at the time. But, as it turned out, it kept me from going camping for another ten years. You see, we arrived late in the evening on Wednesday at the park, after a 500 mile drive from Ft. Worth. The sky was clear and so startlingly beautiful for this city-boy who rarely ventured into the country at night. The three of us found our tent site in the dark, and, by flashlight set up the borrowed tent and then blew up the air mattresses, and unrolled the borrowed sleeping bags, tired but feeling very proud of ourselves for our resourcefulness. But sometime during the night that crystal clear sky was replaced with low clouds that were full of cold, strong and steady rain. I guess we were sleeping too exhaustedly to notice. And I don't know how long it had been raining when we awoke around dawn or so, but it must have been awhile. Because we were floating. It turns out that we had thoughtfully pitched the tent with the door facing uphill. And we had

never heard of the concept of digging a small trench in front of the door. Or rain flies to put over the tent. And in the middle of the night, that rain – fed by a cold front that dropped the temperature to about 35 degrees – had just poured in, inundating the tent with an inch or so of water, and by the magic of physics floating our air mattresses and soaking our sleeping bags with very cold water.

Happy thanksgiving! What a way to begin the holiday. And it only got worse. It turns out that the folks who planned this trip and had been doing it for years were hardcore camping types, for whom adversity only added to the fun. And soon they announced it was time for Thanksgiving dinner. Which meant that we stood in the drizzle huddled around the campfire in our cold damp clothes, sucking pre-done turkey and dressing from little foil packets, telling each other what a great time we were having. It didn't take long to finish that dinner and with the prospect of the whole rest of the day in front of us with little to do except be reminded of how damp and cold we were, a few of us decided to drive to Ojinaga, Mexico. We knew that the car, at least, had a heater. So we drove the two hours to Presidio, Texas. And then we crossed the bridge over the Rio Grande into Ojinaga.

And it was absolutely one of the strangest, most disconnected experiences of my life. For on the American side of the river, it was Thanksgiving: stores were closed, houses were clearly full of friends and relatives celebrating, and the scent of turkey was in the air. But on the Mexican side of the river it was just another cold, gray November day. It was then that I had this almost visceral experience of feeling utterly disconnected – 500 miles from home, with a bunch of people I knew only barely, having feasted on a most unsatisfactory Thanksgiving dinner, away from family and friends. And in that moment what I recall most feeling was the utter disconnection between past and present and future. There was only the present, unhappy, disconnected moment, and both past and future seemed very far away.

We all have had those moments in life where the strangeness of things overwhelms us and we too feel this sense of disconnect from past and future. Maybe it is because of what has been stable, has been an anchor in the past is suddenly no longer there. Maybe it was an occasion where some sort of news or experience totally undercut and made impossible the plans for the future that we were aiming at. Maybe it was good and even welcome change, but which nonetheless evoked in us deep anxieties. And in such moments, it can seem that there is only the present, only the right now. It can be like a kind of paralysis in which that feeling of disconnect makes it hard to move in **any** direction. Because in such moments of disconnect, the past and the future, memory and anticipation seem almost a luxury – we have our hands full just trying to deal with a present that seems overwhelmingly anxious.

In our reading for this morning, the Apostle Paul is writing to folks who also knew their own feelings of “disconnect,” their own sense of anxiety and immobility in the present. The town of Colossae had seen better days. Located off the beaten track in what is now Turkey, the town had once thrived but was now fading fast. Now, instead, that upstart town Ephesus, home to the Ephesian church, was the up-and-coming place to be. Just like so many towns in the ‘60s and ‘70s when the interstate highways bypassed them, the trade routes had bypassed Colossae and left it cut off and disconnected.<sup>1</sup> The past as they had known it was gone and the future seemed so uncertain. And so they too were living pretty much only in the present, feeling disconnected from both past and future, from both memory and hope. And when that happens to anyone, or any organization, folks sometimes begin to clutch at straws. Some of them reached for any new religion or the latest fad that came their way. And that worried Paul, because he had a concern that the Gospel of Jesus Christ not get

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for reminding me of the situation of the church to whom Paul was writing.

itself muddled in things that were not of the Gospel. Some of those folks Colossae began to decide that there really was no future and so they just lived in the past, remembering and relishing their glory days as a way to get through the present day. In the movie of a few years ago, “Friday Night Lights,” there is a poignant depiction of that sort of mindset. Set in the west Texas oilfield town of Odessa, Texas, the movie is the story of one season in the life of the high school football. And one of its saddest moments comes when one of the middle-aged characters, who played on the team 25 years earlier and whose son is now on the team, says that that final year on the team in high school was the high point of his life and it’s all been downhill from there. Some of those folks in Colossae would understand. Maybe some of us have had those moments in life when we would understand too.....

And so Paul takes it as his task to try to revive this Colossian church, to try to help give its members a sense of hope for the future, and to cut through that sense of disconnect they were experiencing. But he does so in an intriguing and unexpected way. He doesn’t give them, as you might expect, “practical” suggestions. He doesn’t give them cliches like “It’s always darkest just before the dawn.” He doesn’t even commiserate with them, and he doesn’t – as he sometimes did with some of his churches – get angry with them. Instead he talks to them about the nature of the past and the future. Did you hear it? *“May God strengthen you with all the strength that comes from his glorious power... enabl[ing] you to share in the inheritance of God’s people.”*

In other words, Paul does two things for this people who are feeling a “disconnect” in their lives, who may be feeling anxious in their present. He first turns their attention to their past – but not just their own past and not in the way that father from “Friday Night Lights” wistfully memorialized his past. Instead, Paul reminds them

that they are and have never been alone, and their past is never just their own past, that they are a part of the past that includes God's whole church and the people of God whom God has grafted the church onto. It is a past, it is the heritage of a God who cares for them no matter what, who suffers and celebrates with them, whose comfort is eternal. It is the God who in whatever place and time demands justice, is not satisfied with simply getting by. Paul offers to them not just a remembrance of their own church's past, or the past of any one individual, but the remembrance of the whole history of God of which the Colossian church and each one of us are a part. It is the same sort of message that we so powerfully celebrated last Sunday as we remembered the saints of First Christian and were reminded that they were who they were because of the saints who came before them.

But Paul also does a second thing, and turns their attention to the future. Again, he doesn't do so with platitudes or easy answers. But he does so with hope and in a way that reminds the Colossian church – and us – that God is not done, that God's work is never only in the past, that, in my wife Barbara's wonderful phrase, God always has a promise and a purpose for our futures. He reminds them that God has always been a God of the future, from the time that Abraham and Sarah were called from their homes to a new land to the time the Hebrew people were called towards a new society in the promised land to the future that God has planned for all creation. God is the God of the future. And how could it not be? For we all know that memory without hope is only remorse, and memory without anticipation becomes bitter, and memory with no stake in the future becomes only nostalgia for what used to be. But Paul will have none of that. Instead he calls them towards a future with these words: *"Through Christ, God chose to reconcile the whole universe to Himself.... to reconcile all things in heaven and earth."*

That's quite a vision, isn't it? Everything – everybody, every man, woman and

child, every liberal and conservative, every gay and straight, every introvert and extrovert, even every Democrat and Republican – reconciled under God’s grand and glorious purpose and promise. But it’s a daunting vision too, and that little voice in ourselves wonders if this is realistic: it’s hard enough to keep things reconciled and beautiful in a marriage or a friendship or with one’s children or one’s parents, sometimes. But daunting or not, Paul is right: without vision, the present becomes stagnant and “disconnected.” Not long before she died, my mother once said, *“I don’t want to die; there’s too many interesting things still to find out and there’s too many stories that I want to find out how they end.”* That in its more down-to-earth way is the very thing that Paul is getting at: God is calling each of us, no matter our age, our state in life, to be captured and animated by an excitement for what the future can yet hold, and a conviction that, under God, through God, and with God, the future can and will be better than the past.

What does all of this mean for First Christian Church? Why on this day these musings on the past, the present, and the future? Just this: during this two-Sunday “Season of Stewardship,” we have the opportunity to show that we too believe and are excited by God’s vision of reconciliation. That we too want to be claimed by and animated by God’s promise of life abundant and eternal, and God’s purpose that all would know that reconciling love that we have known. For let me remind you: your financial gifts to this church are not, in the end, about helping “meet a budget.” Your gifts are not just about having a bottom line that is in the black and not the red. No, a budget is simply one way that we talk about and celebrate the hopes and dreams that we have for this place and this people. It is one way that we say a resounding “yes” to participate in God’s call to be a part of a future of reconciling love. Your financial commitment and pledge to the church is not simply one more bill that you pay each

month, but is the gesture you make every week that says – even when things are uncertain or the way isn't exactly clear, even when there is anxiety about even change that is good – that you know that God is not done with us yet, and like my mother, whether any particular one of us gets to see “how the story turns” out really doesn't matter because what matters is that this community and our witness lives on. Our financial pledges for the future are our recognition of and thanksgiving for a wonderful and inspiring past that feeds us and nurtures us but never traps us.

There is a song that is oh-so-fitting for a morning on when we recall giving thanks last week for the saints of the past, and on which we begin our two-Sunday reflection on the way that our hearts and our minds and our resources can be even more opened for an exciting future of mission, of reconciliation, for promise and of purpose in this place and indeed from this place into all the world. The opening lines of that song are these:

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices....  
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

As we come to our time of morning prayer, I invite you to stand and sing that song with me. And as we do so, I hope that you will join me in indeed being grateful for all that God has indeed done in this place, and through and in each life here, and for all that God will yet do into the future with us and through us, for those countless gifts of love that we are so very privileged to offer back through our commitments. Let us sing!