**Colossians 1:3-8** August 1, 2021

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 *Colossians 1:3We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—5the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth. 7You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, 8and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Why I Am So Thankful for You
*or*One for the Keeper File**

**A. *“If I Were Loved as I Desire to Be”***

 There’s a poem by some dead English guy, been dead for well over a hundred years now—but here’s a warning for people who dismissed the people of the past as “some dead guy”—here’s the warning: Someday they will be able to say the same thing about you. Ok, so it wasn’t just some dead English guy. He was a man named Alfred Tennyson. He was a poet. He titled one of his poems, “If I were loved as I desire to be…” I’m not going to bore you with the poem, just the first line: “If I were loved as I desire to be…” From the first line you might guess that Mr. Tennyson is going to sing some floofy love poetry worthy of an English tea shop, or maybe whine about how no one appreciates him and how he could be so much more if people would just accept him for who he is. We might expect that. But that’s not what he did in that poem. His words are not a complaint about an under-appreciative world. On the contrary, for fourteen lines he speaks powerfully of what being appreciated and accepted does. About himself, he says that when he finds that person who truly loves him for who he is, he will be willing to brave all dangers, suffer all catastrophes, look death in the eye and not laugh but simply look it in the eye and stare it down.

 “If I were loved as I desire” speaks to the truth that when we are appreciated, we become better people. We are stronger; more patient; in turn, more loving. But the very first word of that poem, the first little word “if,” “*if* I were” lets the cat out of the bag: this doesn’t happen often, if ever. “*If* I were loved as I desire” is a great work and its author a great mind because it speaks of a longing deep down in every single one of us. Every single person, whether you be child or gray headed, woman or man, (yes, even men feel this way, though you will never get us to admit it) has this unspoken human desire. It is so deep down inside of us and so universal that it’s like background noise: we don’t even realize it is there. It took the best of poets to realize the fact and to give it voice.

 Which is precisely the appeal of the first words of the Apostle Paul in our reading today. ***“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”*** Now that would be a letter to put in your saved letters file, wouldn’t it?

 Have you ever heard anybody speak that way to you? Have you ever had somebody tell you, “Whenever I think of you, I thank God.” I don’t think Alfred Tennyson did. All he had to say about the subject was, “If I were loved as I desire…” In fact, if someone told us, “Whenever I think of you, I thank God,” we would seriously doubt their sincerity. This world is such a cold and cynical place that we actually can’t imagine anyone other than maybe our own mother saying something like that with a straight face. And maybe not even her!

 But what if, what if the Christian church were a place like that? What if this here group of people exuded that spirit, that when we look across the room and wonder, “I wonder what so-and-so thinks of me?” what if the first thought that came into my head was, “Well, of course they think well of me! Of course they thank God for me. Not because I am so awesome, but because we are brothers and sisters in Christ!” Whoa! That’s a powerful thought, isn’t it? Can you imagine how appealing that would be to the world around us, in these divided times?

**B. Setting for the Text**

 So let’s back up and see what this is all about with Paul and the Colossians. Actually, let’s start right there. What are Colossians? Who are they? Colossians are people who lived in a smallish ancient Greek city named Colossae. The place is now in southwest Turkey. It is situated in a wide valley in a mountainous area. Go to a Google streetview and you will see mountains all around at a distance. This letter we call “Colossians” was not written to all the people in that city, but specifically to the Christians there. What we have in this letter is Paul, a Christian, writing to Christians about matters of the Christian faith.

 But here’s something to consider. Even though Paul spoke so warmly of these people—remember, “We always thank God for you”—he had never met them. If he never met them, why is he talking like this? Why is he writing to them? Why is he even thinking about them?

 Backtrack a few years and this is what we can put together. When Paul had been evangelizing in a city called Ephesus about a hundred miles away, a man with the name of Epaphras heard the Gospel and became a Christian. He did what any Christian with a conscience would do: He took the Gospel back to his family and friends in his home town of Colossae. Speaking and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ he started a Christian congregation. Well, Epaphras stayed on as the pastor at Colossae. In the meanwhile, Paul moved on, as he always did, from place to place until he finally landed in prison in Rome. Actually he was under house arrest. Somehow Epaphras ended up with Paul in Rome. With all the time Paul had on his hands, his friend Epaphras told him all about what had gone on in Colossae. He told Paul about the congregation; it joys and its struggles. Through Epaphras Paul took an interest in these people and started to regularly pray for them. Finally, Paul, under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, wrote a letter to those Christians.

**C. One Reason to Thank God for Them**

 Paul started his letter to these Colossians, ***“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.”***

 The first thing Paul thanks God for is that these people had faith, a very specific faith.

 So often I hear people say, “I think he believes in God.” You know what? Who cares? I don’t mean that flippantly, I mean it seriously. Paul thanks God for these Colossian Christians not because they believed in God but because they believed in Jesus. Now I know that that is what some Christians mean when they say, “I think he believes in God.” But here we must be careful because it is one of the devil’s favorite 21st century lies that saving faith is simply that a person believes that there is a god out there, somewhere. Many or most of the people of Colossae had believed in a god or gods before they heard about Jesus. That saved none of them. The true God’s appointed way of salvation is faith in Jesus Christ. That saved them. Jesus calls the cadence when he says, *“…whoever lives and believes in me will never die;”* *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him…”* It is not knowing that you have a Creator that saves, but trusting in your Savior.

 This group of people in Colossae had heard about Jesus through the Gospel spoken by Epaphras. The Holy Spirit had worked faith in them. And now, because of that fact. Paul was praising God in heaven for making it happen. He just had to praise God for every single saved soul.

 Should not the joy of Paul over every single saved soul also be ours? Is it not right for us to feel that way about each and every one of the people around us in this church? Thank God for the person sitting beside you and in front of you and behind you, listening to the Word of God. Thank God because they know their Savior, trust him for forgiveness, and will shortly receive with you the blessings of Holy Communion. Is it not right to praise God for every soul bound for heaven, whether here in our presence or our brothers and sisters not able to be here this week? Let that be one reason to thank God for others.

**D. Another Reason to Thank God for Them**

 There was another reason that Paul thanked God. He said about the Colossians, ***“We always thank God… when we pray for you, because of… [****reason two****] the love you have for all the saints”*** You see, faith saves. And then genuine faith always goes on to produce acts of love. It happened to the Colossians. We get no specifics. But Epaphras had told prisoner Paul about it when he talked about the Christians in his home town. When Paul heard about them, Paul had to give thanks to God that these people had heard, believed, and then acted like they believed.

 Sometimes it surprises us when it happens. Tremendously blessed Christians give tremendous gifts, and we stand back in awe. Sometimes those who have almost nothing give their almost nothing – those are the ones that bring a tear to your eye. It catches us unawares. I’ll never forget Lyca Mwanamuyamba—what did I just say? It’s a woman’s name. I’ll never forget Lyca Mwanamuyamba, impoverished, aged, decrepit, shuffling out of her grass-roofed house—which was about the size of that cry room there—handing me a bill saying, “Pastor, Get your kids some candy on the way home.” People with faith in Christ do some beautiful things because of Christ.

 Let us thank God for those who sweep and mop the sanctuary and the rest of this facility, who mow the grass, who call one another in times of sickness, who cook casseroles for new mothers and the bereaved, who volunteer every third Wednesday of the month to hand out food boxes to needy seniors; who parent their own grandchildren; who play the organ, sing the songs, read the readings, set up communion and live stream our service; who give offerings to proclaim the Gospel, to keep the lights on and the pastor’s family from starving (actually you do quite a bit better than that); who sew the quilts, serve on the council, and forgive me even when I forget to include their valuable contribution in this list. Think about all those things and the fact that I could have added more and you look around in this place of worship this morning and you say with Paul, “I always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ because of your faith and your love.”

 Thinking about God’s ideal of mutual appreciation among Christians, I see how right it is, how powerful it is, and how far I have fallen short. Sure, I can make excuses about what others have done and what they are like and how busy I am, but in the end I must ask God to forgive me for the times I have not appreciated others, especially other Christians. And trusting in that blood-bought forgiveness, and the hope that God has stored up for me in heaven, I renew my efforts to joyfully thank God for you, your faith, and your acts of Christian love.

 “If I were loved as I desire to be?” Move over Alfred Tennyson because we are loved that way by God. Even better. Now let us do the same for one another. Amen.