

Pathways to Preaching

a publication of the Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary

Topic: The Church as the Holy Community

The church in Colossae likely began around the years 52-55 c.e. as part of the evangelistic activity recorded in Acts 19. The outreach was probably led by one of Paul's colleagues rather than Paul himself. From Colossians 1:7 it could be inferred that Epaphras had been Paul's representative in Colossae. Allusions to a pagan past indicate that many of the church members had a Gentile past. The letter indicates that Paul has heard positive reports of the ways that the church is responding to the gospel through its displays of faith and love. At the same time, Paul wishes to warn them about a false teaching of which they must be wary. Scholars are not entirely sure of the nature of this false teaching, however. The text does not make it clear, though it would seem to be a teaching that insisted on following some sort of regulations as a sign or requirement for holiness. It would seem that the teaching Paul speaks against held that there are angelic or spiritual powers in this world that should be honored through such acts of holiness (2:8).

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WE WILL NEVER
CHANGE THE WORLD
BY GOING TO CHURCH.
WE WILL ONLY
CHANGE THE WORLD
BY BEING THE CHURCH.

Bible Text: Colossians 3:12-17

A key theme of the letter, then, is a warning against regulations for holiness as being human inventions (2:8, 20-22). Rather than focusing on these regulations, Christians should focus on Christ, who is the true spiritual force in the cosmos (1:15-16). Paul explains that as people with a Gentile background they had previously been without God and therefore without hope, but now because of God's grace they have hope in Christ, who has broken the power that sin had over their lives. This happened by being united with Christ in his death and burial through their baptism. Yet this same Christ was also the one who through his resurrection was revealed to be the Lord of heaven and earth, and Christ had raised them together with him (2:12). As Lord of all Christ had done everything needed for salvation. This movement from death to hope through the resurrection would bear fruits in their lives. These fruits were the transformation of the church into a community that lived for Christ rather than itself.

Chapter 3 of Colossians outlines what this new life in Christ looks like. It urges its readers to put away the traits of the old life of sin and, now that grace has been received, to take up the characteristics of a transformed life. In verses 12-17, the church is affirmed as God's chosen people, and thus a holy community. Such a community is marked by love, compassion, and peace. Verse 16 urges that the word of Christ be allowed to dwell richly in the community. Doing so allows wise teaching and admonition of one another and inspires the community to sing songs of gratitude to God.

The Church as the Holy Community

The Law shows us our sin:

Paul describes a community that would indeed be wonderful to be a part of. Each person is humble, kind, and patient. Everyone forgives one another, is loving towards each other, and seeks peace and harmony.

What could be better? Who would not long to be part of a community like that? If this is the kind of community that the church is supposed to be, though, why hasn't any church that I have ever been a part of been like this? Why are churches so often places of jealousy, competitiveness, people more concerned with their own interests than the interests of others? The lived out experience of the church is far from being a unified body of Christ led by Christ ruling in everyone's hearts. God commands the church to be a holy community of care for one another. Yet the reality is that when we gather as a church, we bring with us a host of aims and agendas that lead to disunity rather than unity. Sometimes these differences are a matter of deeply held convictions of what it means to follow Christ faithfully, but often the differences stem from self-interest at least as much as concerns about faith. Members of the church community are often proud, abrasive, and irritated instead of humble, kind, and patient. Grudges linger. People are frequently more concerned with what position they hold rather than selflessly serving others in whatever role is needed. As a place where humans gather, the church is a place infested with human sin rather than the compassionate community of God's chosen people that it is called to be. Rather than ignoring this situation, it is important to identify it as part of the reality of our human brokenness.

The Gospel shows us

God's grace:

Despite the reality of sin, the Word of God dwells within the church.

The church is not only the place where the Word of Christ is spoken through reading the bible and sermons, it is the dwelling place of the body of Christ! In verse 16 it says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

As Christians, we do not simply read the bible and remember that Jesus walked the earth and taught wisely. We do not simply proclaim that Jesus was crucified and is risen. Christ comes and dwells within us as we die to our old lives with Christ and are raised with Christ to new life. As the Holy Spirit stirs faith in our hearts, the living Christ enters and is truly present within us. Christ's presence does not eliminate the reality of sin in our lives, but rather it negates the separation from God that sin causes. Even though we are sinful and our communities are imperfect because of it, God in Christ does not reject us. Instead, God comes to us to be present among us. In Christ we are God's chosen people, as it says in verse 12, even though we are still sinful and we do not live as God commands.





The Church as the Holy Community

Transformation:

Yet Christ does not merely overcome the separation from God that our sin causes. Christ dwelling in our hearts also transforms us. We can experience that transformation individually, but also together as the church we become the body of Christ as we gather together in Christian love for one another. The text does not merely say that Christ dwells in us, but instead urges that Christ be allowed to dwell richly. This rich dwelling of Christ indicates that Christ's presence can be in abundance and not simply as a trace presence. As Christ's love pours into our hearts, it begins to overflow beyond us. It bursts forth from us in the form of love for one another. This love coming from each of us binds our church communities in love for one another, but then bursts forth beyond that into love for the world. When the church acts as the instrument of God's love not only for the members of the church but also in reaching out in compassion to the needs of those outside of it, it is truly acting as the body of Christ and Christ is dwelling richly. It has been transformed from a gathering of sinful people into the holy community of God's holy ones. The characteristics of kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love, forgiveness, peace, and harmony are markers of the dwelling of Christ. These are the characteristics of Christ, not humanity. Human attempts at community are rife with sin, but Christ creates a holy community.

Songs and Hymns:

- *The Church's One Foundation*
- *Take Time to be Holy*
- *Buried With Christ*

With arms outstretched on the cross, Jesus took holy God in one hand and sinful man with the other and brought the two together.

— Steven J Lawson —

AZ QUOTES

Preaching Law + Gospel = Transformation

Through the Law, God tells us God's vision for how life ought to be in this world. Law tells us what God commands us to do. Yet if we take God's command seriously, we will recognize how far short of it our lives fall. Thus the Law shows us our sin. Law tells us what we must do, but actually makes us realize that it is beyond our power to accomplish it.

Gospel, on the other hand, tells us what God does. Despite our failings, God acts with grace. When God's grace comes to us, not only are we forgiven of our sin, but the Holy Spirit empowers us to serve God out of love. In hearing the gospel, our hearts are transformed.

In a sermon, we hear the Law that tells us of human actions and reveals to us our sin, and we then hear the Gospel of God's unfailing love and mercy. Together they bring forth transformed hearts. In *Pathways to Preaching*, for each biblical text we will consider how the Law speaks through it, how Gospel speaks through it, and the transformation that occurs through the Word of God.



The Church as the Holy Community

Theological Reflection on Doctrine

We are simultaneously saint and sinner. That is, we are sinful people who are hopelessly separated from God because of that sin. Yet despite our sin, Christ grants us his righteousness. Thus before God we are righteous because we belong to Christ, not because of what we have done. Yet as Christ dwells in our hearts, we become more and more shaped by Christ's love into being loving people. We cannot escape our sin, but Christ's righteousness becomes more and more a part of who we are. This is true individually, but it is also true of our church as a community. Sin is a reality of human communities, and yet the church is also capable of incredible acts of love. Congregations support members who are sick or are grieving the loss of a loved one. The church provides education to children who could not otherwise receive it or support overwhelmed parents. The church provides healthcare to those in need and emotional support to those in distress. Even though the church is imperfect, it can still act as an instrument of God's love for the world. This does not come from human hearts, but from Christ dwelling within the hearts of humans, transforming them towards the kind of love that God has for the world. The church is both an institution of frail and sinful humanity and the body of Christ, the chosen people of God giving of themselves in service to others. The church is never as perfect as we would hope or as God calls it to be, and yet Christ is forever at work within it transforming it into a holy community. In faith, we place our hopes in what God does through us as that chosen people. This work of God of Christ dwelling within us moves us to sing praises and hymns, as verse 16 says, but also moves us outside of our churches to serve others in need with the compassionate love that Christ implants within us.

What do theologians say?

“The Body of Christ has penetrated into the heart of the world in the form of the Church. The baptized Christian is baptized into that Body. Christ has come to him and taken his life into his own, thus robbing the world of its own.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 20th century German Lutheran theologian, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 259.

“If Jesus Christ is Lord of the church, then the church is his servant. It is that congregation of people whose identity as the people of God arises from a definition of servanthood that is derived from Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. By definition, the church exists for others, because its being is determined by the One who died on the cross for others.”

— James Cone, contemporary African-American theologian, “What is the Church?” *Speaking Truth*, 124.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, fill me with your Word richly so that I overflow with your love. Lead me to lift up praises of thanksgiving to you and knit together your church into a community of praise. I know that on my own we are bound to sin, but we pray in the power of your Holy Spirit we might be holy witnesses to your love and grace for the world. Lead us to joyfully be your people and to serve the need of others. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.



Humility: *footwashing*

Topic: Humility (foot washing)

Intro/synopsis: The season of Lent begins on 1 March this year. Lent is the time in the Church year when we follow Jesus' journey to the cross and grave. In this season, we reflect on Jesus' willingness to sacrifice himself for sinners. Lent is 5 weeks long and has special days that congregations can experience. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, with the opportunity to worship and trace a cross in ashes on our forehead. After 5 weeks of confession and remembering how our sin leads to death, we come to Palm Sunday worship, where we hear how the crowds first praised with "hosanna," but soon cried out "crucify him!" During Holy Week, many congregations gather for worship on Maundy Thursday. "Maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandate" or "command," when Jesus humbly washed the feet of his disciples, on the night of the Last Supper. Often the pastor or Church Council

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Bible Text: : John 13:1-17

The reading tells us the context of this story: it happened during the Passover meal. On that night, Jewish people did the important act of remembering what God has done to save them. For us, we see Jesus becoming the Passover lamb whose blood would save us from death. (Exodus 12) Here, John 12:1-3 tells us that death is coming, that humans will betray Jesus, but that his love will never end. Jesus shows this by washing and feeding all of the disciples, even Judas.

This passage shows the cosmic conflict of the forces of life and the forces of death that happens during Holy Week, and how Jesus' humility will affect that conflict. This passage also reminds us that in the Gospel of John, each of Jesus' acts reveals something about Jesus to his disciples. These acts include the wedding at Cana, the raising of Lazarus, the many healings, and many more. So what does this text reveal about Jesus? Jesus, in the footwashing and in the trials and cross, is humble before God, humble before his disciples, and humble before the crowds/Romans/Satan. His humility reveals his love for all, as well as revealing what kind of power Jesus will use to change and save the world.



Humility: footwashing

Law + Gospel = Transformation

Law/Gospel/Transformation

This text has many ways to look at Law (what we must do, but fail to do), Gospel (how Jesus saves us and gives us hope), and Transformation (what we can do in new ways because of hearing the Law and Gospel). Here are some examples of how law is met by Gospel and leads to transformation. A preacher would do best to choose one set to focus on rather than all four.

Law:	Gospel:	Transformation:
The text names Judas as “Son of Simon Iscariot,” emphasizing his human father and his role in the human world and its powers.	God is named as Jesus’ Father, reminding us that Jesus comes from God, receives his earthly role from God, and is going to God. Jesus’ home is with God. Jesus shares his heavenly home with the disciples as a free gift.	The footwashing gives a “share” in Jesus’ fellowship with God. Jesus acts as host at the events of this night, and as host he invites us into his eternal home with God.
Jesus must be made low (the role of a servant) and must die horribly (later on the cross). The verb in verse 4 for removing his clothes is the same verb used throughout John for “laying down his life.” Jesus takes the garb and position of a lowly servant, because of us.	In verse 12, Jesus returns to the table as he hosts the Last Supper. In the Last Supper we see Jesus giving us eternal food, a powerful miracle. The gospel is that Jesus goes from being made low to being exalted. Our sin does not eternally crush him.	Through Holy Week and Easter, Jesus is transformed from being the earthly host and servant of the disciples to being the eternal host (at the eternal banquet) and eternal servant (as he helps and saves the whole world).
Peter says no to the love and fellowship that Jesus is offering him (v.8, “you shall never wash my feet”). Peter is too proud to have his Master become anyone’s servant. Peter speaks for the disciples and us when he tries to rebuke Jesus’s humility.	Jesus does not let Peter turn away from him; Jesus insists on washing his feet and teaches him why. All the work here is done by Jesus; Jesus asks only that the disciples (and us) place ourselves in his hands.	Jesus tells Peter that he has already been bathed (baptism). He does not need to be bathed again, but through the footwashing, Peter is brought back into intimate relationship with Jesus. His baptism can lead him back to Jesus any time, and the Lenten washing of feet is for penance and re-connecting with Jesus.
In verses 1-11, we are called to serve. This is something we must do, but we often do it poorly or for the wrong reasons. Verse 1-11 <u>reveals</u> to us our role as disciples, today washing one another’s feet.	Verse 12-20 shows Jesus gracefully serving us, not because we earned his love, but because he is so loving. Jesus sets us an example of love and empowers/teaches/commands us to love others. Verse 12-20 <u>reveals</u> Jesus’ love.	Jesus calls and empowers us to serve others, because we have been served by him. Through serving our of God’s love, we <u>reveal</u> Jesus to the world, and we <u>reveal</u> ourselves to have a new identity as holy servants.



Humility: footwashing

Theological Reflection on Doctrine:

The key image of this story is Jesus wrapping a towel around his waist and kneeling at the disciples' feet. To Peter, this is absurd and unacceptable. At a feast, in those times, a host would leave out a bowl of water and perhaps command the lowest servant to wash the guests' feet. It was scandalous for Jesus, the host that night and their Master, to wash their feet.

When we think of law/gospel/transformation, our first question is always: "what is God doing here?" This passage does not show what the disciples are doing to save themselves and the world. The disciples do not wash Jesus' feet (even though Peter tries!). No, Jesus takes the humble role of a servant, and he washes the disciples' feet. In the gospel of John, Jesus will soon suffer extreme pain and humiliation for our sake. Jesus uses humility to use the power of the oppressors against them. Their whips, crown of thorns, and cross will not end Jesus' love. For three days, these weapons will make the disciples think that humility was the wrong choice for Jesus – they will think that he can save no one. But Jesus, like a seed buried in the ground, bursts forth with new life; and the seed grows to be a plant that can feed and shelter all in need.

So what is God doing here, in the story of the footwashing? God in Christ is showing intimate care for each disciple; God in Christ is resisting the desire for worldly position and power; God in Christ is showing that Jesus the humble servant and Jesus the Passover lamb can change the world through his sacrifice. We also hear a mandate (command) from Jesus, which pairs well with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20. Here, in John 13:14-17, we hear the command to wash one another's feet and be servants to one another. In humble service we are changed and we become able to share the message of the gospel and to lovingly change the world, humbly but joyfully empowered by the Holy Spirit.



What do theologians say?

Rudolph Bultmann, a leading 20th century Biblical scholar, writer and professor, states:

"The explicit theme of [verse 1-11] is the fellowship with Jesus; this is shown to be grounded in an event that contradicts the natural reason, namely in the service rendered by Jesus, the binding power of which will prove itself... if [the disciple] is prepared to base his life on this event and on it alone. The second section [verse 12-20] adds that this fellowship of the disciples with Jesus at the same time opens up a fellowship amongst themselves, and that for the former to exist, the latter must be made a reality through the disciples' action." From The Gospel of John: A commentary, page 476-479.



Humility: footwashing

What theologians say:

“...foot washing was so much more than a symbolic act of his incredible servanthood. Jesus wanted to share a personal, vulnerable, loving moment with each of his dear friends. I wonder whether spending a moment with each person gave him comfort as he prepared to be arrested and crucified. I wonder whether his charge is less about servanthood and more about its basic foundation: limitless love.” -Alaina Kleinbeck, Director of Duke Youth Academy <https://www.faithandleadership.com/alaina-kleinbeck-foot-washing-about-love-not-just-servanthood>

“[In the excitement of Palm Sunday,] their leader wasn’t singing. ‘When he came near and saw the city, he wept over it’ (Luke 19:41). Yes, their dreams were coming true. But not in the way they imagined. He was not the king they expected. He wasn’t like the monarchs of old who sat on their jeweled and ivory thrones, dispensing their justice and wisdom. Nor was he the great warrior-king some had wanted...



He was riding on a donkey. And he was weeping, weeping for the dream that had to die, weeping for the sword that would pierce his supporters to their soul. Weeping for the kingdom that wasn’t coming as well as for the kingdom that was.” –N.T. Wright, Simply Jesus, page 1.

Further reading... A liturgy for Maundy Thursday <http://www.liturgybytlw.com/Lent/MaunFW.html>

Related texts: Luke 17:7-10, John 13:14-17; Mark 10:42-45 (servanthood); Isaiah 53 (song of the suffering servant).

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your faithfulness and for sending your Son, Jesus, to be an example for us and to save us. Without You, O God, we are nothing. Keep us close to you, Lord Christ. Cleanse us through our baptism and help us repent of any sin. In this journey of life, wash our feet and invite us into your eternal home. Bring us to feast with you, and help us to feed those who in these days hunger for food or for knowledge of you. May we witness the stories of the Bible as they reveal your love to us. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.