

Gospel Reading:

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)

From the Shadows to the Substance

My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now live him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly.

You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.

Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve. It's not a matter of being circumcised or keeping a long list of laws. No, you're already in—insiders—not through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin. If it's an initiation ritual you're after, you've already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of your old life; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ.

When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.

So don't put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days. All those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ.

Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are. They're completely out of touch with the source of life, Christ, who puts us together in one piece, whose very breath and blood flow through us. He is the Head and we are the body. We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us.

This morning, I'd like to talk about something that caught my attention in this passage. Did you notice it? There was a line or two about being in the "fullness of Christ." When I heard it, I wondered what it meant, especially how it might be tied to Jesus in some fashion.

I don't know about you, but when I think of being full, my first thought is of eating too much at a meal, something we do too easily on vacations or during the holidays like at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We can't seem to help ourselves – there's so much to pick from, and it all looks real good – we usually gorge ourselves at the table, and then feel so stuffed, we need to waddle ourselves over onto a bed or couch someplace to digest it and take a nap. I know if I get too full, I'm really uncomfortable for a long while, and I don't even want to look at food for a good day after one of these feeding frenzies.

This kind of fullness doesn't sound like a good thing to me, so I'm pretty sure the Apostle Paul wasn't talking about being full of Christ as we get full of food.

Maybe we need to get some meanings to compare.

Webster defines fullness as "the quality or state of being full."

My Mac Dictionary defines fullness as "the state of being complete or whole or (alluding to biblical use) all that is contained in the world."

In Paul's letter, the Greek **pléróma** means "a filling up" – this referred to **pléroó** which means to complete or to make full.

Fullness...

Paul used the word **pléróma** first in this letter to the Colossians, and then again in other Epistles. He was very specific about it, relating it to Jesus' bond to the people...why would "fullness" be so significant?

As with several other letters (two of which carry some doubt as to whether or not Paul is the actual author), this letter to the Colossians was written while he was in captivity, which means he was in chains, under house arrest and couldn't travel to see his churches, though he had meals brought in and he could accept visitors. Being a Roman citizen gave him a few more privileges. Apparently he was in captivity or in prison many times, and sometimes for years at a time – and while it sounds awful, mostly, usually it just restricted how much he could visit his churches.

Keep in mind that this was the era of a new church founded in Christ's memory – and it was very visible and just “out there” enough to get its members into some trouble with the leaders of the church and Rome. It was the time of persecution and martyrdom, and as one of the new church's founders, Paul's messages and behaviors spoke loud and clear against many centuries-old traditions and beliefs, so it's not surprising that the authorities would feel the need to find ways to shut him up. But Paul wasn't very cooperative – he continued to do his work by messenger.

Colossae, like so many of the other new Christian communities Paul established, had its own set of problems, though not as many or as serious as the Corinthians or the Galatians may have had. The Colossian church was made up of Gentiles - and Jews who had converted – some in the latter category felt they had more “spiritual maturity” than others, and they flaunted it. They also pushed the diet-and-circumcision issue, even though they knew Paul felt it wasn't necessary to follow Jewish law to belong to the new church. Hard feelings followed, then the usual bickering and back-biting – and so Paul wrote this letter and sent it by way of his trusted assistant Tychicus to be delivered to and shared with Colossae and nearby city Laodicea.

If there were bad feelings among the people of Colossae over who were the “better believers,” then it would make sense that Paul would want to remind them of the depth and breadth of God's love for them – **the fullness** of God's grace through Jesus – so that they might accept one another more openly and get with the program. He reminded them that there was nothing they could do to be accepted by God – just existing was enough, because God's grace through Christ provides for them.

He warned the steadfast new church to stay away from those who speak with false security, who are full of hot air, who act like they have the inside track.

He even hinted at avoiding idol worship and worldly ways that lead to the wrong path. Paul implored the members of his church in Colossae to turn away from these voices and remember how whole – how full – God has made their lives new through Jesus.

Paul believed, (even while being held prisoner in his own home) that Jesus' life, death and resurrection were everything, bringing fullness – wholeness - to anyone who accepts God's gift and lives God's Way. Period.

Fast forward to now, in this time and place.

How do we experience the fullness Paul spoke of? Where do we see it, feel it, know its presence in our lives?

We could say God's fullness in Christ is evident in how members of our church family live in harmony. We have learned to accept and love one another, to respect our differences and celebrate our similarities. There doesn't seem to be much grumbling and comparing around here – cooperation and affection are strongly evident, and the feeling of harmony is obvious to anyone who walks through our church doors. We are a family of God and it shows.

We could say God's fullness in Christ is evident in how many members feel called to share. We recognize how much we have, how complete our lives are thanks to the many blessings from God, and as a result, we try to find ways to spread that abundance – to offer portions of it to others in need. The sharing comes in many forms; gifts of time, of money or financial support, of caring and emotional support, and of physical work are offered, accepted and (more importantly) passed forward. We honor God's love by sharing what we've been given.

Another way I believe we recognize the fullness of God's love for us through Jesus is in the way we seek to know more, to learn more about this faith we live in. Accepting many blessings is one thing, but accepting without understanding the God who gives them would be empty, meaningless "taking." While we realize God's grace has brought us together, our relationship with God is complex, and if we challenge ourselves to go more deeply into how we know God, Jesus and the Spirit, our fullness expands to another whole level of appreciation.

I have to say, the more I learn about our faith and our God, the more humble and thankful I am...and the more I want to know! This Christian life has survived so many potholes and roadblocks, it's astounding how for thousands of years, people continue to seek and find God!

In our faith community today, there are several opportunities to gather to learn about God and our beliefs, and we hope to add more in the coming months, because in order to bring others to God, we need to be confident believers, prepared to speak openly and freely of our love and faith. God's fullness in our lives makes us want to know God better, and we're eager to learn.

So when we think about all the ways we realize the fullness of God through Christ, it would seem that we have grown, and if Paul were our founder, he would be proud of who we are and what we've become...our letter to the Prescottonians would be a warm, supportive epistle from a proud father in faith.

Paul believed all individual gifts from God should be put to the good of the community, and we seem to be doing God's work God's Way.

The challenge for us, then, is not to get so comfortable that we forget to stay strong and to "keep on keeping on."

We need to continue to allow God to nourish us and strengthen us for the work we must do in God's name - and take it one step further.

This means that we should grow into another status in our faith life –becoming more like disciples who will serve God, in the memory of Jesus. Our time of looking after ourselves and our own needs has passed, and because we feel full from all the blessings God has brought to us, and we recognize that, as Paul says, “Christ is the substance” - we are being called to give back - to feed others this amazing food. The time has come to put our faith to action...just think of all the good we can do because we have fullness in Christ!

So, think about how you feel full in the faith and how you can help others get that way too. My dear friends, God has set the table – so let's eat!

Amen.