

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 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 the authorities and made 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 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.

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY

My friend Joan leads a girl's Bible study at a large church. She tries to keep things light and uplifting, trying to give the dozen or so teenage girls a brief respite from their daily teenage stresses by studying God's Word. When the class began, Joan gave the girls an assignment. "At the next meeting, I want you to introduce yourself to the group." She wasn't looking for names and club affiliations, but for insight into how the girls saw themselves.

Joan talked to Ashley, the young assistant pastor, about the assignment and ask her to do the exercise. Joan planned to read it to the girls at the start of class to get the discussion moving. Sure, Ashley said. I knew myself well enough to write a few paragraphs.

"Who I Am"; Ashley wrote quickly. Then nothing. Ashley stared at the blank page before her, thinking of all the things she thought she would be expected to say. "I love Jesus. I am a Christian," she wrote. It was true, but somehow it felt forced. She scratched it out.

Page after page lay crumpled around her bedroom. "Why is this so hard?" she said to no one in general and God in particular.

Then it dawned on Ashley. She kept trying to make a list that had God as the first priority. It felt forced because He wasn't the first priority – He was much more than that. He wasn't a bullet point on her list; He was the paper the list was written on, the foundation for everything She wanted to be and to do. Suddenly, writing about who she was and what she valued became much easier.

Lord help us remember that You are in everything we do, say, see, and experience.

"I Can Do It Myself"

Human beings are created to be meaning makers. We believe everything has a legitimate meaning for happening. Arguably, this quest for meaning is what separates us from the rest of God's created order. It is what marks us as *imago Dei*, created in the image of God. When we confront an event in our lives, whether it is joyous or tragic, momentous or mundane, we wonder what it all means. Why do we do this? We do it because the search for meaning shapes our sense of identity. How we make meaning of our lives shapes our understanding of who we are and why we exist.

Developmental theorists argue that this shaping of our individual identity is a crucial task that begins as children begin using the word "Mine" to claim a toy for themselves, or they insist to their parents and caregivers that "I can do it myself"! For most of us, this shaping of an individual identity takes on new importance during our adolescent years, when concerns about independence and freedom become paramount.

All developmental theorists agree that this task of shaping an individual identity never ceases; it continues for the rest of our lives.

As we grow in our individual identities, we begin to understand that who we are is shaped in large part by those around us – by the communities to which we belong. Despite the American concept of the rugged individualist or the myth of the self-made woman or man, we eventually come to realize that these are concepts and myths that do not represent reality. No one can survive as an individual. There is no such thing as a self-made woman or man. Eventually, we must come to understand that our individual identity is part of a larger shared identity. The task of shaping a shared identity is the hard work facing the believers in Colossae. Struggling with outside influences on which they had once adhered. Paul says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human traditions, according to elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ”. These believers are trying to develop the common, shared identity without which no community can exist. Indeed, a shared identity is one of the essential elements that define a community. Simply living in proximity to one another or sharing a common language is not enough. The believers in Colossae, like the other new Christian communities throughout Asia Minor, were working to form their own identity in the midst of a culture that was sometimes indifferent and at other times competitive and even combative. What message, then, would help this community further develop and strengthen its shared identity? The writer to the Colossians, Paul, decided on a message of memory, because collective memory is an essential component of a community’s shared identity.

Today’s passage is an invitation from Paul and Timothy to the community in Colossae to remember where they came from and to live faithfully out of that powerful source of remembering. Remember, they write, that you are rooted in Christ and built up in him. Remember, you are established in the faith. Remember what you were taught. This is a poignant and powerful call to shared identity through the practice of collective remembering.

All communities are made up of memories. Theologian Fredrick Buechner writes in “A Room Called Remember” that there is no escaping some memories, even if we want to avoid them. Every person we have encountered, every place we have visited, every event we have experienced – all these are instilled in our memory and come rushing back to us, even if we wish to suppress them.

In one sense, Buechner writes, “the past is dead and gone, never to be repeated, over and done with, but in another sense, it is of course not done with at all or at least not done with us.” These kinds of memories are part of us, even part of our shared identity, whether we like it or not. They seem to have some power or control over us. Beautiful or terrible, they are part of every community’s memory. Buechner reminds us that most congregational memories, at least in the form of congregational biographies, are very carefully constructed and usually intentionally leave out the unpleasant events. Nevertheless, no matter how carefully we try to suppress them, these memories still live on, if only in whispered gossip or as wounds that have not been given an opportunity to heal.

These are not the kind of memories that Paul and Timothy are invoking for the believers in Colossae. They are calling on the community to active remembering, a much more deliberate and willing corporate act. They are calling on the community to remember as an act of worship that forms a theological core.

Remember, they tell the community, that in your baptism you put off the body of flesh and were raised with Christ through faith in the power of God. Remember that God forgave all your trespasses and triumphed over the rulers and the authorities of the day. The kinds of memories that Paul and Timothy are calling on the community to remember are the memories that shape their shared identity and give them a sense of resilience, power, and purpose. These are not the kinds of memories cited by Buechner, which seem to have control over us. Rather, these are the kinds of collective memories that we invoke when we sing “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” or “The Church’s One Foundation”. The one body takes priority over the cliques and parties we devise for ourselves. We now can lay aside the divisions within our soul.

Imagine a foot washing service we find ourselves attending. We are in the midst of those people, people we don’t have the same social, political, academic, views with, the others. Yet, when the time comes, we find ourselves, helpless, having our feet washed by those “goofy” and “crazy” people. Then we turn and wash the feet of someone who must be “goofy” and “crazy” too. We leave changed at a soul deep level.

In the tradition of the great African American spirituals, these memories remind us both of who we are and how we survived.

We need to claim these memories as a community, because our individual minds can be faulty; left on our own, we are prone to self – centeredness and self-pity. Memory in shared identity lifts us as a community, defines us with a sense of purpose, and draws us closer to God. By shared memory we grow as a body, and our strength is renewed, as Paul and Timothy write, by the power that comes from God. When a community is in struggle, it is best to use the gift of intentional corporate memory to rekindle and strengthen the shared identity that will sustain it now and in the future.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, you pour out the Spirit of Grace and supplication on all who deserve it. Deliver us from the cold hearts and wandering thoughts, that with steady minds and burning zeal we may worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Through the grace of God, we are raised with Christ to new life and life together in the body. Christ is our head, for us all.