

Faith Grows Here

by

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Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. ⁷This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 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.

Before going to seminary, I worked for a non-profit based in Haiti. In my role I oversaw their fundraising and grantmaking. One of my most important priorities was cultivating relationships with individuals and institutions across the United States who believed in our vision. To do this I traveled a lot: Philadelphia to Port-au-Prince to Denver to San Francisco and back again. On one particular trip I spent several days in a little town called Preston, in eastern Washington state. Preston is the home of Broetje orchards, a family run apple orchard that was one of my non-profit's most generous supporters. I remember flying into the two-gate airport, the prop plane casting its shadow over farm field after farm field during the descent. The owner met me at arrivals and drove me out to her family's orchard. Having been born and raised on a small island myself, I confess my ignorance regarding all things related to industrial farming. As I watched row after row of apple trees pass by outside the car window, I began to ask my host questions: how many apple trees do you have? How do you pick them all? Where do the apples go? How do you keep them ripe? As we neared the entrance to the orchard, my host paused before responding to my most recent question, "Just give it a few days," she said, "you're about to learn a lot about how things grow. Every person you meet will teach you."

"You're about to learn a lot about how things grow" – that could be the tag line to the book of Colossians. Except we might replace "things" with "faith." "You're about to learn a lot about how faith grows." The book's author, the Apostle Paul, is writing to a new Jesus-following community to encourage them in their fledgling faith. Paul has never met the people in Colossae, but he's heard about them. Like the grand opening of a new restaurant, the reviews are good so far, but everyone wonders, can they keep it up.

Paul's purpose in writing is to teach them more about their new faith, and he couldn't be more excited to do so. It's difficult to notice in our English translations, but in the original Greek text, verses 3 through 8 are one long sentence. Our translation has broken it down into five sentences, but in the Greek, it reads as if Paul is so excited, he just can't

stop talking. Paul has heard of their faith, he keeps them in his prayers, he thanks God for their witness, and their faith is already bearing fruit and growing in the world. Praise God!

And Paul is just getting started. Within his litany of thankfulness, Paul acknowledges the source of their faith and growth, “this you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.” It’s all thanks to Epaphras, their teacher. Without him the growth would not be possible.

If, “you’re about to learn a lot about how things grow” could be the tagline for the book of Colossians, then I propose that the second sentence my apple orchard host said to me could be the tagline for the church, “Every person you meet will teach you.”

From its earliest days the church has been defined by a growing faith made possible because of great teachers. Some of these teachers you might recognize from around our church. You find them in the Sunday School classrooms and bible studies, up in the choir loft and over in the gym. Others you’ve probably met but in more subtle ways: the usher on the way in this morning, the helping hands assisting people out front, the friendly face who helped you find your way after the new construction, even the faces and names of old looking down on us from the stained glass. We can learn something from every person we meet.

Three weeks ago, my wife, Amy, and I had the privilege of standing on this chancel before all of you for the baptism of our daughter, Florence, just as Joe and Brooke did today for their son, Rory. Having officiated a few baptisms myself I wondered what it would be like to answer the questions instead of asking them, to receive rather than teach. As I stood up here, looking out on all of you, squirming Florence in hand, I confess you all taught me something new in those moments. I listened as Rachel asked the questions of Amy and me. I witnessed the children pledge to be a friend to Florence, when she needs

directions, they will show her the way. When Rachel turned and asked all of you the baptismal question for the congregation, your response resounded with conviction “we do.” At the end, Rachel came close and told Florence about the arc of scripture, about creation and fall, salvation and forgiveness, and then closed with words truthful and winsome, “although you know none of this,” she said to baby Florence, “...we promise to teach it to you.” Church, I confess it pure grace to know that you will teach my daughter what it means to grow in Christ. That when she gets lost or needs a friend, that you will take her by the hand and show her the way. Florence does not know any of it right now, but I give God thanks that she has all of you as her teacher. Her faith will grow here.

The church is the place where faith grows. It grows in this sanctuary, in the classrooms down the hall, in the conversations with pew neighbors and coffee companions. Just as apples cannot grow absent a particular mixture of soil (a fun fact I learned on my apple orchard tour), so we cannot learn apart from this place and the relationships we make in it.

If you’re worshipping online, or you have trouble getting here as often as you’d like, you may be asking yourself, “well, what about me, how do I grow if I’m not there in-person.” Remember, Paul was writing from a distance. He had not met the church in Colossae, only heard of them through letters. Yet, his voice permeates their gathering to offer a word of hope and encouragement, just as their letters have encouraged him. If you are worshipping at home, I encourage you to connect by letter and word, through phone call or zoom. Just because you’re not in-person does not mean you cannot bear fruit and grow; does not mean you cannot continue to teach.

And, lest we become tempted to reduce God to this physical place, remember the church is wherever you gather with another faithful follower of the risen Christ. Church takes place in coffee shops and

prison cells, over the phone and on the road. We can learn to live lives worthy of the Lord from teachers we meet all throughout life's journey.

And friends, I believe that as a nation we desperately need to learn from one another. We've constructed rigid boxes to sort one another: by neighborhood, political party, news network preference, how we interpret the constitution, and cultural background. How might our lives be changed if we approached every person believing, "this person can teach me something"? I'm quite fond of the convicting quote from legal activist and author Bryan Stevenson, who said, "It's hard to hate people up close." One of the gifts of the church, of this place, is that we are all gathered together, close to one another, neighbor next to neighbor. We do not all think alike, we do not all share the same story, but we are all here, and that is something of a miracle. We can all learn from one another. We can choose to be closely bound together by a common growing faith in the risen Lord.

To go back to that apple orchard in Preston, WA. My host was right. For five days I shadowed her around the orchard and every person I met taught me something. I learned a lot about how things grow, especially apple trees. I learned how apple trees are planted, grafted, and developed. I watched the process of picking apples, and then cleaning, sorting, and boxing them.

More than apples, though, I learned about something bigger, something unexpected. I learned how my host's faith, and the faith of her family, produced another kind of fruit in the world. I heard about their mission as a family orchard, to donate all their profits to organizations like the non-profit I worked for. I learned that every year they hired thousands of individuals desperately in need of work and provided them with far more than a paycheck. They built homes for the workers and their families to live in, opened schools for their children, provided healthcare for the whole family. When I asked why, my host responded with all the grace of a seasoned teacher, "because we're called to bear more fruit than just apples."

Friends, faith is not an end in itself. Your faith will grow here, but it cannot stay here. Faith is not the final goal. If you think it is, I encourage you to keep reading today's text. Paul writes, "...we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding," in other words, "faith," "we have not ceased praying for your faith," "**so that** you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work..."

We grow in faith **so that** we can lead lives worthy of the Lord.
We come to church **so that** we can be equipped to bear fruit in the world.

We listen to teachers **so that** we can be more faithful disciples.
Our faith grows here **so that** together we can respond to the needs of the world.

This is why it's so important to be together each week. This is why we need one another. Every person you meet in this place will teach you something. And they probably could not be more excited to do so. So come close, lean in, listen, and learn.

Our little children, they can show you the way when you get lost.
Our Sunday School teachers, they can tell you about the stories that guide us.
Our ushers, they can illuminate the rhythms we follow as a community.
Our choir and musicians, they can teach you how to praise with song.
Your neighbor down the pew, they can share the gift of themselves.

Every person here will teach you something. You're about to learn a lot about how faith grows, **so that** you can bear good fruit in this world that God so loves.

May it be so. Amen.