

Title: *How to Live in Community*

Text: Colossians 4:7-18

There are two statues in Washington D.C. that together tell a remarkable story. One is the massive memorial to General Ulysses S. Grant that stands at the east end of the Reflecting Pool, literally in the morning shadow of the U. S. Capitol building. Visitors can hardly miss this majestic depiction of the legendary general atop his war stallion. Grant's military leadership was decisive to the Union's victory in the Civil War, and he is considered a symbol of the force of human will, an icon of the strong man who stands against the storm when all others have shrunk back.

Some two-and-a-half miles away, in a pleasant but nondescript city park, stands a more commonplace memorial. The statue of this lesser-known Civil War figure, Major General John Rawlins, has actually had eight different locations and is hardly ever noticed by visitors. Rawlins had been a lawyer in Galena, Illinois, where Grant lived just prior to the war, and he became Grant's chief of staff. Rawlins knew Grant's character flaws, especially his weakness for alcohol. At the beginning of the war, Rawlins extracted a pledge from Grant to abstain from drunkenness, and when the general threatened to fall away from that promise, his friend would plead with him and support him until Grant could get back on track. In many ways, it was Rawlins who stood beside the seemingly solitary figure of Grant the great general. Rawlins' memorial is modest compared to the mounted glory afforded Grant, yet without his unheralded love and support, Grant would hardly have managed even to climb into the saddle.

Ulysses Grant's greatness as a general and military commander is not in question, although most historians would regard him as a failed president. What is always interesting, though, is to look at the behind the scenes kinds of people who really make the operation work.

In all of Paul's letters, there is a predictable pattern. There will be a doctrinal section which answers questions or attempts to give instruction with regard to some current controversy in the church. He will follow that words of what we would call practical instruction on how to live in the church, how to live as family or how to deal with some difficult, divisive issue in the church.

He will then conclude with a series of greetings to people in the church who have been close to him or a series of commendations to those who have been helpful to him in his ministry.

It's like I hear about a controversy which is raging in a former church where I have served or have connections. (It's difficult to imagine doing this, because pastoral ethics say that when you leave a church, you leave. It doesn't mean you don't care about the people and you're not still friends, but you don't meddle in the internal affairs of what is no longer your church, and you don't want to step on their new pastor or hinder the process of calling a pastor.

For the sake of illustration, though, I hear about a problem that is hindering the fellowship of that church, and someone calls me and asks me a question about it. I write back a letter, which would be read in a worship service or some other gathering of the church in which I

deal with the issue from a doctrinal or theological perspective. I might then spell out what this looks like in terms of practical Christian living. Then I might commend the person who called and asked the question. I might remember people in that church who were a particular blessing to me in my ministry there and I might tell them about someone on my team now that they need to know about because it will bless them and encourage them and spur them on to greater love and good deeds.

It's tempting to think about not preaching these passages – to view them almost like a collection of throw away lines that, yeah, they're in the Bible, but who wants to hear them in a sermon?

The more you look at these verses, though, the richer they become. For the sake of preaching our way through these this morning, I've divided them into three sections.

In 7 through 9, we see that Paul was surrounded by a **team of trusted encouragers**. I've chosen each of those words carefully and each of those words is significant. The first person he mentions is Tychicus. Probably no one in here has ever heard a sermon on Tychicus before and that's unfortunate because we probably should have.

Have you ever wondered how Paul's letters got from place to place? They had to be delivered by someone whom Paul could trust who would be able to endure difficult circumstances and grueling travel to get these important communications to the right place. He says, ⁷ "Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord."

In Acts 19, we read about some of the difficulties that Paul encountered in Ephesus. He preached the gospel and it really took hold. So much so that the silversmiths who made the pagan idols were put out of business. They started a riot and town was in great uproar. I love Acts 19:32 which says, ³² "The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there."

In Acts 20:4, Tychicus is listed in the traveling party that was with Paul when it came time for him to leave Ephesus. Paul could say that Tychicus was a dear brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant because he didn't cut and run – as some others had – when the going got tough.

It's interesting to look at the similarities in the Ephesian and Colossian letters. Colossae and Ephesus are not that far apart and it is theorized that Tychicus was delivering two letters. The letter to the Colossians and the letter to the Ephesians which may well have been a circular letter which was to be read in the 7 churches which were listed in Revelation 2 and 3, all of which were relatively close together in that same area.

One man whom Paul greatly respected was Titus, the pastor on the island of Crete. Paul wanted to have some time with Titus but pastors can't just drop what they're doing and take off on an extended leave. In Titus 3:12, Paul writes, ¹² "As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there." What's significant is that Tychicus is the kind of guy that Paul can say, "I feel comfortable sending him

in and am confident that he can cover and do everything that a pastor should do in that church.”

Paul says in verse 8, “I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.” Paul wanted the Colossians to understand what it was like for him in jail. He may be choosing his words selectively in describing why Tychicus is coming to them. He doesn’t say, “I’m sending Tychicus so he can tell you how rough it is for me to be in prison and so that you can feel sorry for me.” In the way that we kind of have when we write letters we take the focus off of ourselves and put it on the recipients. But if you look at the extraordinary life and witness of Paul, you know that he was not one to want to call a lot of attention to himself. Tychicus is the person who can represent me well in what I’m going through but can look through whatever negatives there might be in the situation and find positives that will encourage everyone.

What is also interesting is that when Paul sends Tychicus, he’s also sending Onesimus with him. Onesimus is the escaped slave whose story inspired the writing of the letter to Philemon. Onesimus was an escaped slave whom Paul led to Christ. Paul wanted to convince Onesimus to do the right thing and return back to his master. That triggers a discussion of slavery which is far beyond the scope of what we’re talking about this morning. Slavery is never desirable, but in the ancient world it was much less of the brutal, race-based institution that we had in this country. At the same time, Paul is telling Onesimus, “You need to go back to Philemon,” he’s telling Philemon, who is a believer, why don’t you release Onesimus to me. He’s become useful to me in my ministry. In Philemon, he writes:

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.”

As you look at these verses, the point is that Paul was surrounded by a team of faithful encouragers. They were a team. I went looking to do a word study to see if I could find the word “team” used in the Bible anywhere. I only found one instance in Isaiah talking about a team of horses. The New Testament doesn’t use the word team and doesn’t give a definition of team. Instead, maybe we have something better – we have illustrations. You can look at all of the people who have aligned themselves with Paul and his ministry and how he’s able to deploy them here and deploy them there and you get a picture of a group of folks who are united and on the same page who are functioning together as one with shared vision and shared cause.

Over and over again, Paul refers to these folks as faithful. They are faithful to their calling. Paul has their trust and one of the things that they do over and over again is to encourage

one another. As you attempt to serve the Lord, do you have a team of faithful encouragers around you? Are there people who share your vision and your values whom you know have got your back and when you're down they'll pick you up? We all need those kinds of people in our lives. Are you a part of someone else's team of faithful, trusted encouragers?

Tychicus and Onesimus weren't the only two workers who were a part of Paul's team. In verse 10-15, he goes on to mention several others and what is striking here is that it reads like an all-star team of those who have been significant in the establishment of the church. Two of the gospel writers are mentioned here, Mark and Luke. Isn't it interesting that Paul had a falling out with Barnabas because Mark deserted them on their first missionary journey. Paul didn't want to take him on the second but Barnabas did. They disagreed so sharply that Barnabas took Mark with him and Paul took Silas.

Now Mark is there with Paul and Paul is vouching for him to the Colossians, making sure they know that if he comes around, he's a good guy and you should welcome him. What is striking to me is the testimony about a man named Epaphras. He says, "Epaphras is one of you and is a servant of Christ Jesus." More than that, there is one person about whom Paul calls attention to his prayer life."

He says, "Epaphras is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." That word wrestling in prayer is the word ἀγωνιζόμενος which of course, sounds like the word agony or agonize. This isn't just something that's done when it's easy or when it's convenient. It's done continually and out of a deep burden to see this church thrive and prosper in all that God intends for them to be.

His prayer is that you'll stand firm. I find it interesting that that word translated firm means complete or mature. In the Sermon on the Mount, it's translated, "Be perfect". James uses that word when he says, "Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." As James prays that for those who read his letter, Paul says that's what Epaphras prays for the Colossians.

His prayer is that the Colossian church will stand firm, grounded in the will of God and that they will be fully assured of their faith. As Epaphras prays, he resonates with what E.M. Bounds would write centuries later:

We are constantly on a stretch, if not on a strain, to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations to advance the church and secure enlargement and efficiency for the gospel. This trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man or sink the man in the plan or organization. God's plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than of anything else. Men are God's method. The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men....

What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use — men of prayer, mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but man —

men of prayer.

Lastly, Paul mentions the price that he is willing to pay to carry out his ministry. In verse 18, he says, “Remember my chains.” This isn’t done in a whine or with a plea for pity. Rather, it was just a reminder. This Christian life isn’t easy. It isn’t always a walk in the park and it’s not an easier life when you come to Christ. When Paul came to Christ on the Damascus Road, one of the things that Ananias was told was, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” The writer to the Hebrews said, “³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.”

We are encouraged today to remember those who are paying the price for what they believe and to stand with them. Paul really is saying, “I’ve talked about some lofty themes and some theological topics and it may overload the circuits at time but this is more than just a speculative, intellectual discussion. This is where we really live and I have staked my life to it and if you’re ever tempted to turn your back or to walk away, remember I’m in chains for what I’m writing to you. You might ask ‘Are any of those who are mouthing false doctrine in jail?’

Paul tells us that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is worth giving your life to, but you can surround yourself with a team of faithful encouragers. You can give yourself to prayer. You can know that there are people who are paying the price and that it is worth it.

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