

Sermon 8 March - Leith Valley Presbyterian Church

Preacher: Lynne Baab

Scripture Readings for 8 March

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:1-5

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that 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. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow-servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

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, so that you may lead lives 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. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:1-14

Sermon

When you pray for missionaries overseas, what are some of the things you pray for? (Ask congregation for answers.)

When you pray for people in mission here in New Zealand – perhaps Rock Solid, a ministry in South Dunedin where lots of Leith Valley people volunteer – what kinds of things do you pray for? (Ask congregation for answers.)

I'm going to talk today about prayer for mission, and I want to say first off, keep praying for the kind of things you're praying for. I want to add to your prayers, not replace them. After the sermon we'll have our "prayer for others" based on what I've said today.

I want to begin by looking at the passage in Colossians that I've chosen. Paul starts by greeting the Christians in Colossae, a town in what is now Turkey. Let's see what we can learn about this Christian community from Paul's letter.

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

We learn that Paul is writing with Timothy, and that there are enough believers there for Paul to write a letter to them. In case you're curious, Colossae is in Asia Minor, about 150 ks from Ephesus on the coast.

The next paragraph has a lot more hints about this community:

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that 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.

Note the combination of faith, love and hope, a combination Paul seems to like quite a bit because he talks about it elsewhere in his letters. I'm so tempted to stop here and talk about how we can pray for faith, hope and love as we pray for mission, but there's a key idea in the next paragraph that I want to centre this sermon around. Note also Paul's emphasis that their lives have been bearing fruit because of the gospel, because that idea occurs later as well.

This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow-servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

We learn that someone names Epaphras brought the gospel to the Colossae, and he has brought a report to Paul about these Christians. Epaphras has stressed to Paul that these Christians have faith in Christ, love for each other, based on hope.

The next two verses are the key verses for this sermon today.

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, so that you may lead lives 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.

Paul prays that the Colossians may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. He prays for the outcome of that knowledge of God: leading lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing to God, and bearing fruit. Coupled with the kind of life that bears fruit is an increase in the knowledge of God.

I see this as a spiral upwards. We learn something about God. If we act on it, trying to shape our lives into the model of Jesus, trying to do the kind of things that bear good fruit, we will grow in knowledge of God.

We've all seen spirals downward. For me it's food. I get discouraged, I overeat, I gain weight, I get further discouraged, I overeat some more, and I stuck on a spiral that takes me down, down, down. This upward spiral Paul is describing moves us closer to God.

How many of you have ever engaged in any kind of mission trip overseas? Usually we set off on a mission trip because we've learned something about God that motivates us to want to serve. We go and serve, our lives please God, and we bear some fruit. How many of you came back home with a deeper knowledge of God because of the mission trip? That's exactly what Paul's describing here.

This is the heart of Christian mission – to engage with God is doing in the world. What is God doing? Drawing people closer to him, so that they might know him better, which then leads to living a life that pleases him, which leads to good fruit, and then which leads to further knowledge of God.

I chose to have the passage about the vine and the branches as the second scripture for this sermon.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

This passage from John 15 emphasizes relationship. We cannot live the kind of lives that bear fruit without staying close to Jesus. I think that's exactly what Paul is talking about in Colossians 1. I like that Colossians 1 adds the upward spiral I've been talking about, that knowledge leads to action which leads to fruit which leads to more knowledge. But let's remember that knowledge in the Jewish sense isn't head knowledge. Remember, in the Old Testament a man would "know" his wife, meaning have sex with her. Knowledge implies intimacy and relationship, not head knowledge.

I believe the evangelical church in the West has gone wrong in recent decades by stressing that people need to be able to give assent to things about God. We view knowledge of God as the ability to check off a bunch of statements in a list. We pray that people would become Christians – a good thing to pray for – but we don't see the pattern described here. Paul longs for people to know God and know about God, and then lead lives worthy of God and bear fruit. He views further knowledge of God as coming from this process, not coming from a list of statements about God.

Let me give you a few illustrations of this upward spiral as I see it in this congregation. I think of Phil and Clair Scadden, who became convinced of something about God, that God cares for the physical creation and calls us to take care of it. So they got involved with A Rocha, a Christian movement involved in caring for specific places in God's creation. They've borne some lovely fruit through their involvement with A Rocha. I bet if you asked them if they have grown in knowledge of God through it, they would say yes.

I think of Rachel Elder, whose job involves finding jobs for people with disabilities. Rachel learned something about God, that God cares for the marginalized. She was blessed to gain a job that enabled her to act on that belief. She has borne some wonderful fruit as she has helped people with disabilities find jobs. I'll bet if you ask Rachel if she's grown in knowledge of God because of working in that job, she'll say yes.

I think of my husband Dave, who taught dentistry at the University of Washington School of Dentistry for much of his career. Way back in the late 80s Dave noticed that the Dental School didn't teach the students anything about ethics, so he volunteered to pioneer an ethics class. Dave had become convinced about something about God, that God desires that we see the overlap of our faith and our profession. His desire to teach ethics came out of that knowledge of God.

He had a sabbatical at that time, and spent the whole sabbatical studying ethics. He started the ethics class, and got good feedback from the students about the ethical issues he presented to them. His actions bore good fruit.

It wasn't all easy, though. The other professors in his department were not at all supportive, in fact even antagonistic, because they believed that ethics didn't have anything to do with their area of dentistry. Teaching ethics meant Dave had less time to teach the subjects the department was supposed to teach.

Dave's experience of the big challenge of acting on what he knew to be true about God isn't unusual, and it explains why Paul's prayer continues:

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

I've been describing an upward spiral: we learn something about God, we act on it, our lives please God and we bear fruit, and we grow in knowledge of God. This upward spiral isn't always easy and smooth going. Rachel Elder has told me she often finds it difficult to find jobs for people. She has to try over and over. What if she gave up after making one phone call? "May you be made strong with the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience." She needs that strength. My husband Dave needed that strength when he was getting criticism about the ethics class.

I want to make one more point about Dave and the ethics class. He couldn't have done it alone. I tried to support him, but I also saw some amazing support from two members of our small group at that time. One fellow was a business man who had done some thinking about business ethics, and I remember the conversations he and Dave had, and the ways he supported Dave. A woman in our group worked in a medical lab at the university, and she understood university politics, and was able to support Dave in yet another way. This upward spiral depends on support from others. It doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Paul's prayer for strength and power and patience, "while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light," exactly fits with so many people's experience. You learn something about God, you try to act on it by going on a mission trip or by trying to speak the truth to someone or by trying to serve someone or by trying to be faithful at work. Your life pleases God, and you bear fruit. But it's hard, and you find you have to rely on God's strength more than you ever expected, but God's strength is there for you. This enables you to give thanks to the wonderful God who has saved us and who "enables us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light."

So how does this relate to praying for mission? I believe we should pray for missionaries and people in Christian service, that they would know God in a way that enables them to act on it. As they act on what they know, they will bear fruit and continue to grow in the knowledge of God. I believe we should be praying for this whole process.

When we pray that people would become Christians, we should pray that this process would begin. It's not just about people giving assent to the idea that Christ died for their sins. Instead, it's about acting on what we know, bearing fruit, and growing in the knowledge of God. That's what we should be praying for when we pray that people would come to know Jesus.

We should be praying for our friends and family members and ourselves this way too. Let's do that right now, and move into our prayer for others.