Missional Mindset & Community

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[0:00] So, I don't know about you, I've been thinking a lot about the church these days. We've been in this COVID business for something like eight months now.

There doesn't seem to be any end in sight. COVID has disrupted a lot of what we've been doing at St. John's, disrupted a lot of what has been going on in each of our lives, at least on the surface. And any time we face a crisis, there's always a necessary re-evaluation. What do we really value? And then that important follow-up question, if that's what we value, how do we move forward? What steps do we take? What do we hold on to? What do we let go of? Now, today, we come to the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians.
The Colossians themselves had been in a crisis. Though it was not a pandemic. And Paul is writing this letter to encourage them to look to Christ, to cling to Christ, and to walk with Christ.
[1:05] He spent the last few chapters encouraging them to stand firm in the faith. He reminded them first of Christ's supremacy, and then reminded them of that intimate connection they had with the Supreme Christ Lord of the universe.

Chapter 3, verse 3. You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. That's a pretty remarkable reality. As followers of Jesus, our life is hidden with Christ.
And as this letter concludes, here in chapter 4, Paul takes that inward reality of a Christ-filled identity, and he turns it outward into action.
Reminding the Colossians of a truth that he proclaimed right at the start of the letter, chapter 1, verse 6, that in the whole world, the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing. And with that verse as our lens for this passage, things break down pretty tidily, I think.
In verses 2 to 6, we have what I'll call the missional mindset. And then in verses 7 to 18, we'll have the missional community. All of it focused on, in the words of chapter 4, verse 3, declaring the mystery of Christ.
[2:15] So first, that missional mindset. Paul gives us three commands. Continue in prayer. Walk in wisdom. Speak graciously.

Now, it's no coincidence that Paul begins his exhortation with prayer. He even began his letter with prayer. And it's also not a coincidence that of these three commands, pray, walk, speak, the first one on prayer is the most detailed, because prayer is the very lifeblood of our relationship with God and Christ.
Unless we are regularly coming before God to talk with him, to thank him, share our hopes with him, submit our wills to him, he will always feel distant.
And his will for our lives, will feel less like the loving guidance of a father, and more like the random intrusions of an overbearing bully who doesn't have our interests at heart.
The father longs for us to know him in the same way that Jesus knows him. But that deep relational intimacy can't happen if we're not coming to him, talking to him, listening to him in prayer.
[3:35] And it doesn't need to happen with eyes closed and hands folded necessarily, though there's a time and a place for that. But in every moment of our lives, we have the privilege, the ability, the gracious gift to enter into God's presence in prayer.

Now some friends of ours recently gave us a lovely little book called Every Moment Holy. Maybe some of you are familiar with it. It's a collection of liturgies for everyday life.
So there's a liturgy for the start of the day, for a meal with friends, for the changing of diapers, and so on. It's not an exhaustive list, of course, and sometimes in the middle of those tasks, you're too involved to do the entire liturgy.
So our newborn, Ruby, for example, needs a lot of diapers. I don't do the liturgy every time. But the purpose of the book is really helpful because it reminds me that all of life is to be spent drawing

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near to God's presence, seeking his will, asking for his guidance, submitting to his lordship.
All of life can be consecrated, set apart with prayer. So Paul exhorts the Colossians to continue steadfastly in prayer.
[4:59] But not just that, to pray with watchfulness, with thanksgiving, and with purpose. We pray with watchfulness because in the words of 1 Peter, our adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

Threats can come from outside, from within us. We need God's protection. We need to be on our guard, watchful. The reality that we can be deceived or led astray to doubt God's goodness or Christ's sufficiency, like the Colossians, is also why we need to pray with thanksgiving.
Because as we learn to participate in God's sovereign plan with gratitude, our hearts and minds are guarded by his peace. In an earlier letter, Philippians 4, verse 6, Paul says this, Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ. So we pray steadfastly, we pray watchfully, we pray thankfully, and we pray with purpose.
Specifically, the purpose that the gospel of Jesus Christ might be declared clearly. Now I think there's an interesting connection between Paul's request that comes in verses 3 and 4 and his last two commands in verses 5 and 6.
[6:43] I'm not sure if you guys have a Bible with you today, it looks like many of you do not. That's alright, we'll do our best. In verse 5 he says, that's Paul, walk in wisdom towards outsiders, non-believers.

And then in verse 6, let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you might know how to answer every person. I'm not sure how you feel about it, but to me that feels like an impossibly tall order.
Except that immediately before this, in verses 3 and 4, Paul asks the Colossians in effect for the very same thing, to pray that he too would walk in wisdom and speak graciously.
In a pastorally astute and really heartwarming gesture, Paul reminds the Colossians that their ministry in Christ is his ministry in Christ.
They are laboring together for the same thing. And in his request, we see the other side of the equation. The reality is that it is God who opens the door for us to walk wisely, to speak graciously.
[7:48] It is the Spirit who moves through us as we seek to live out and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is precisely why prayer is so important. If we as Christians are to have any true witness in this world, it is because the power of God is at work in our lives.

Paul wasn't an incredible evangelist under his own power, which he acknowledges so clearly and so helpfully in his request here. Paul was an incredible evangelist because God chose to use him in that particular way.
The very same God who is choosing to use us. Now that doesn't mean you're Paul because you're not. And you might not get Paul-like results.
Maybe you will. The point is the same God who was at work in Paul is at work in us. And with that reality undergirding, let us walk in wisdom in the world.
Speak words seasoned with the salt of the gospel. Let us continue steadfastly in prayer that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ to friends, to neighbors, to coworkers.
[9:11] That is the missional mindset. And it is absolutely central to the life of the church. We don't exist for ourselves.

We are a people sent by God to proclaim Jesus' lordship, to continue his ministry, reconciling the world to himself by his blood for his glory.
Whatever her circumstances, the church is always the church. The people of God by the power of God that work in the world.
Now, having exhorted the Colossians with this mindset, Paul transitions to his final greetings in verses 7 to 18. And these greetings, I think, they beautifully illustrate the missional community that Paul and the Colossians are part of.
Which is exactly why he includes so many names at the end of this letter. He wants to remind everyone that united to Christ, they are all part of something bigger than themselves as the gospel

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goes forth in power throughout the world.
[10:25] One thing that stood out to me the first time I read it was that warm familial language Paul uses. So there's Tychicus, the beloved brother and fellow servant. sent to encourage your hearts.

Anesimus, the faithful and beloved brother. Aristarchus, the fellow prisoner. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Jesus Christ, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers. Luke, the beloved physician.
There's just such a, hmm, a deep connection Paul feels with these people. It's so inspiring. And the other thing that really jumps out at me is that this haphazard collection of people are united not because they share the same ethnicity or the same language but because they are one in the Lord Jesus Christ working together for the kingdom of God.
Now, interestingly enough, all of these folks in this list have their own story going on. So in Acts 20, verse 4, for example, we run into Aristarchus again who comes from Thessalonicae.
Tychicus, the Asian, is going with Onesimus to deliver Paul's letter to Colossae. Epaphras is the one who brought the letter in the first place and is now praying on the Colossians' behalf.
[11:47] The beloved physician, Luke, wrote Luke and Acts and accompanied Paul for many of his works. All of these people with their individual stories, are testimony to the power of the gospel going out in the world bearing fruit.

Paul is saying to the Colossians, look, this is what you're a part of. Getting this letter today would maybe be a little bit like Tim Keller writing to St. John's and saying, oh, by the way, Tom Wright, John Piper, and Andy Crouch, your fellow workers in the gospel, say hi, they're praying for you.
Paul includes these final greetings to encourage the Colossians with the lived examples that bear witness to the glory of God. And he also does it, I think, to remind the Colossians of the profound connection that all believers have in Christ.
The same God at work in Colossae is at work in all of these people. It's all about pointing to Christ.
Now these people come from different regions, they become Christians at different times, they all have individual walks of faith, they bring glory to God in different ways.
And I think to illustrate it, we're going to focus on two names in particular for a moment. Demas, who's mentioned with Luke in verse 14, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, mentioned in verse 10.
[13:19] Now Anesimus is actually a really interesting example, but we're going to get him next week in the letter to Philemon, so stay tuned for that. Now, we learn about Demas here in 4 verse 14, and there aren't really any other mentions of him in this letter or in the letter to Philemon, but if we jump over to 2 Timothy 4 verse 10, Paul is writing to Timothy and says, do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with his present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

So Demas, it turns out, falls away from faith. The specifics of how or why he did aren't mentioned anywhere else in scripture, other than that sobering phrase from Paul, he was in love with his present world, which is such an easy thing to do.
We don't know the full story of Demas, don't know where his heart was, what his ministry with Paul looked like, we don't actually even know if he returned to faith, so I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill here, but we can see at the very least that Demas was a fallible man in exactly the same way that Paul was a fallible man, and both of these men were used by God to spread the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, which is why Demas is mentioned as part of the community of faith here in this letter.
The very same God at work in Paul was at work in Demas and God used him even with the knowledge that he would fail. So in Demas we have an uncomfortable example of God's power and also an example of why we need to continue steadfastly in prayer.
And that brings us to our second noteworthy name in this motley crew of saints, Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. Now you might recall in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas actually have a falling out over Mark.
[15:35] Mark had abandoned them earlier in their ministry to southern Galatia. Perhaps in a similar way to Demas, he saw the mission at hand and said this is too much, I can't.

So Paul moves on without him and takes Silas into Syria. Here, a decade later, we see Paul and Mark are reconciled with each other. And in a very striking contrast, if we go back to 2 Timothy 4, one verse after Paul mentions his disappointment with Demas, he writes, get Mark, bring him with you for he is very useful to me for ministry, which is quite the reversal.

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Here in Mark's life, we also see the power of God at work. Not only does Mark grow in his trust in the Lord, but there is reconciliation in the community where once there was a schism.
If Demas is an uncomfortable or an ambiguous example, Mark is an encouraging example of why we continue steadfastly in prayer because the power of the gospel can transform anyone and the power of the gospel is the spirit of the Lord at work in his church, which is why we pray in the first place.
Now, from these two examples, we can see that the church, the missional community, is always a mixed bag of people. we have our less than perfect pasts, we have our daily struggles with temptations, we all fail in obeying the Lord both in what we do and in what we do not do, but because of God's faithfulness, because of his love and forgiveness, each day and each moment, we are invited to take up our cross and follow him, to participate in his ministry.
[17:32] We don't place our faith in the church, we place our faith in Christ, the head of the church, who fills his church with his spirit and equips us to be sent out, to walk wisely, to speak graciously, so that we may know how we ought to answer every person.

Now, I began this sermon by ruminating a bit on our identity at St. John's. We're in an uncomfortable season. It's kind of weird preaching to an almost empty sanctuary.
We can't do church the way we used to do it. The church is not a building. We learned that as a congregation a decade ago.
The church is also not a thing we do. And maybe that's a lesson God is trying to teach us. We are not defined by our ministries as wonderful as they can be.
The church is the community of all who are in Christ. Church is an identity that transcends circumstances.
[19:02] Church is the people of God sent out for the sake of the world. The same God who was at work in Paul and Mark and Demas and the Colossians at work in us.

So let us continue steadfastly in prayer. Being watchful in it with thanksgiving and at the same time pray that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ.
Let us walk in wisdom towards outsiders making the best use of the time and let our speech always be gracious seasoned with salt so that we may know how we ought to answer each person.
Be encouraged brothers and sisters grace be with you. Amen.

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