

"Christ Is All and In All"

Colossians 3:1-11

July 31, 2022

York Center Church of the Brethren

Preacher: Jonathan Shively

I have been watching some of the January 6 hearings. They are a fascinating and disturbing look into our former President's efforts to remain in office in spite of the election outcome. One aspect of the proceedings that has particularly caught my attention is the role of loyalty and fidelity to the former President.

Many who have been called to testify have made statements like, "It was at the point where I felt he was supporting the violence in the capitol that I knew I would be resigning that day." I am wondering what made that one moment different than hundreds of other moments over the prior four years.

Why did Ms. Hutchinson, Mr. Cippollone, Mr. Pottinger, Ms. Matthews and others remain so loyal to the former president for so long?

Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene's radical political views have come under scrutiny again this week. Her philosophy, dubbed "Christian Nationalism," has received national scrutiny through Newsweek and Time Magazines, to name a few, and become a social media flashpoint for all stripes of Christians.

One of the questions arising for me from this national debate is simply, "Who and what are we being loyal to?" Sure, I ask this of others, but most importantly the national debate has become an opportunity for personal reflection: Who and what am I being loyal to?

Many things compete for our allegiance and loyalty. We all know this. I have been taught, and you most likely have as well, that there is a pecking order to loyalty. Oftentimes these lists include God, country, political position, family, self, maybe neighbor. How would you order your loyalties? God, family, country, self, neighbor, political position?

I believe that one of the frustrations the Christian movement is experiencing at the moment is that for many people in our culture, God is no longer at the top of the priority list. If I were to make a judgement, I would say that for many people "self" has replaced

God. For some there may not even be a God in the priority list at all. For others, political affiliation or country has risen to the top. Maybe family is above God in some priority lists. The phrase Christian Nationalism implies that some form of country has supplanted God as the principle priority in our public conscience.

The matter of priorities is not one about which I feel smug. I've been in enough leadership positions in the church over the years to know the struggle to keep God as the priority in my personal life as well as in the life of our communion. It is difficult, well nigh impossible, for us to will our priorities into alignment with God's invitation to loyalty.

But our text from Colossians is perhaps one of the clearest New Testament texts on the matter of priorities and loyalties. "Christ is all and in all."

"All" is an indefinite pronoun - nonspecific being, object or place; meant to encompass totality. When I say that I ate all the potato chips, it is clear that there are none left for anyone else in the household. But often we use "all" in an exaggerated, idiomatic manner. "All" my energy is depleted is not exactly true. If all my energy were depleted, I would be dead. But the sentiment is understood as meaning that I just can't do one more thing at the moment, and you'll find me on the couch or in my hammock.

There is no such wiggle room in our text's use of "all." To be a follower of Christ is to unequivocally recognize Christ as the primary object of our loyalty. When we ascribe Christ that principle spot in our lives, all other secondary priorities fall into place.

The call to Christ is voluntary and personal. The fallacy of Christian Nationalism is that loyalty to Christ can be captured through loyalty to country. Christ is all for those who choose to follow Jesus; we can't legislate or threaten or coerce anyone to claim Christ as all.

In the language of the Apostle Paul, we are raised with Christ and ushered into a new revelation. That revelation is a reordering of the world, a heavenly focus on God that radically reorients our life on earth.

"Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living

that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.”

When our focus is on Christ, when our number one priority is God accessed through Christ, those loyalties are reflected in our character and our actions. Brethren have referred to this as “by the manner of our living.”

For the confessing Christian, there is no wiggle room on the number one priority: Christ is all.

But what of the second part of that statement? Christ is all and in all.

Have you ever fallen in love? I sure hope so. When we fall in love we see and experience qualities in the other person that are attractive to us. I’m sure there is a ton of science about how and why this happens, but for me it remains somewhat of a mystery.

Think about your love: what are the qualities and character of that person?

The unique thing about falling in love is that we see that person like we see no other. No matter who else we meet, no one can hold a candle to the one we love. For us, they are the one.

Falling in love with Jesus can also be this way. We become captivated by the presence and image of Jesus, and we fall in love. That’s a good thing.

But Jesus the Christ is more than just a singular object of our affection and attraction. The Christ we see is inherently present in everyone we meet, in all of God’s creation. To us Christ becomes everything; the Christ is in everyone.

When we fall in love with our romantic partner, we maintain our focus on that one person. No wandering eyes, no comparisons, no further seeking.

When we fall in love with Christ, we are encouraged to look around. Fidelity to Christ invokes a universal quality to our love. Christ in all invites us to see Christ in everyone we meet, in all dimensions of God’s creation.

Story from Fuller - Rick Reynolds is a graduate of Fuller Seminary, one of my alma maters. In Seattle, Washington, Rick found his ministry calling with Operation Nightwatch, a ministry dedicated to combating homelessness. They serve 120-140 single adults and run an apartment building for 24 formerly homeless seniors.

As the executive director of Operation Nightwatch, Rick has a close-up view of the issues and challenges which lead to homelessness. He also lives with an awareness of the ways that homeless people are viewed, and describes the divide between the city's homeless and mainstream people as "sadly ironic."

He tells a story to illustrate that those with homes are not so different from the homeless. "The newspaper covered how an area of town was being cleared out by the authorities, and likely needed to be. The mayor was proudly showing off the mess that had been left behind by 'filthy homeless people' on the little greenbelt area.

But buried on another page was an article about a 10 million gallon sewer overflow into Lake Washington that barely ruffled anybody's feathers at the time. Ten million gallons of sewage from people living in houses that dumped into a local lake but we're going to focus on the half ton of garbage that homeless people left behind, because they are forced to sleep outside and don't have anything to do with their cans and bottles and effluent." He says he wishes people could see that "human beings are human beings, and everybody's worthy of dignity and respect. They all have the stamp of God on them."

The problem, Rick suggests, is that cultural lenses of prejudice make it difficult for us to recognize the image of God in the poor. "They're all created in the image of God, and that's the thing: I want people to look, and not just look past." (Fuller, Issue #14)

Rick goes on to tell of his own struggles to live into this vision of seeing, recounting how he has avoided the gaze of panhandlers in his community, only to realize later that it was a person that he knew through his ministry.

I would wager that this inability to see is not just a have - have not dynamic. My hunch is that we avoid seeing pretty much anyone we understand to be a stranger: the mom in the grocery store, the tradesman at the gas pump, the businesswoman at the Starbucks counter, and so on.

What gets in the way of our seeing? Perhaps it's the fear of confrontation, since we hear so many stories about difficult encounters. Perhaps it's that we're just preoccupied with the many concerns of our own lives. Perhaps it's that we lack our own self-confidence to let others get a glimpse of us. There are many reasons that we might not see those around us.

Rick is not the first one to make this observation, and he is certainly not the only one to have this struggle!

Jesus was the best example of not looking past anyone. Perhaps the key to our seeing is to look for the Jesus in the other. If we approach the other seeking an encounter with the image of God, perhaps it will increase our anticipation of the engagement.

Recognizing that Christ is in all is to seek and find the image of the creator in those around us. The image of Christ becomes the defining quality of the other: there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

This is a challenging passage. Our personal fidelity is challenged by the expectation that if we are in Christ, if as our tradition ascribes we have been baptized and immersed as a member of the family of God, God will be our top priority. If Christ is all to you, he will shape your life.

When Christ is all to us, we will seek out the Christ in others, aware that the creator is a part of all who we encounter. Our eyes will be open to the new reality of a renewed knowledge that about the image of the creator, and the created.

You have been raised with Christ. May Christ be your all and may you see Christ in all.