

Pentecost 8 – Year C
22 July 2007
Saint Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri

Colossians 1:21-29

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. Amen.

Do any of you like to write letters? (It’s okay; you can raise your hands.)

Some people say that letter-writing is a lost art in our high tech, inter-active, cell phone, e-mail, instant messaging culture. And, I think that may be so.

But, like some of you, I’m one of those unusual people who enjoys writing notes and letters. I was one of those children who had pen-pals in grade school. And, I still like everything about writing letters. I love shopping for stationery and cards, finding a great new pen that just feels right in my hand, buying the latest commemorative stamps at the post office. I even love opening the mailbox to see what is there each day. Jerry teases me that I can’t stand it if the mail sits in the mail box more than a couple of hours.

A number of years ago now, a very dear friend of my family died. Joe and his wife Betty had been friends of my parents for many years, and I spent many fun times at their home when I was growing up. After Joe’s death, I wrote Betty a few letters, just to tell her I was thinking of her. Well, what I didn’t know was that she, too, loved writing letters. Pretty soon, and to my surprise, my letters were being returned.

And, for about eight years now, Betty and I have exchanged letters just about every week. Oh, we've missed a few weeks, but not many. Every once in a while we call each other on the phone, but mostly it's letters that we use to communicate.

We write about what each of us is doing; when her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild come to visit; a new recipe I've tried; how mad we get when the St. Louis Cardinals are in a losing streak; her visits to the doctor; flowers I have planted in my garden; her hot water heater that leaked.

It's the common stuff of our lives. Nothing profound or fancy, but through these letters, our relationship has deepened and our friendship has grown. It's a back and forth, give and take conversation over time and space. And, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Now, when we hear the epistle readings each Sunday, I think it can be easy to forget that what we are reading are letters. We're sort of eavesdropping in someone else's mail, if you will.

These letters were originally part of a back and forth, give and take conversation over time and space. But, we see only one little piece of the correspondence. I think that's unfortunate, because it causes us to miss a whole lot. We don't see how the written conversation developed over time, how the relationship grew and deepened. Sometimes it's not even clear exactly what situation or circumstance was being written about.

It would be like reading one letter out of the hundreds that Betty and I have exchanged, without knowing that it was only one letter in a whole series of letters. You'd miss some really important things.

The apostle Paul appears to have been quite an active letter writer. His letters are the oldest Christian writings that were included when the twenty-seven books of what we know as the New Testament were put together. They were written even before the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And, of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, thirteen are letters that were either definitely written by Paul or are closely associated with him.

But, even with all of Paul's letters that we have in our canon – the Bible, I'm guessing that Paul wrote many, many more letters than those we have to read today. As he traveled on his missionary journeys and as he sat in prison cells, I can imagine him writing many letters to his friends and to fellow believers that he had never even met. Then, sending these letters off to be read in distant places. Probably not dropping them in the local Roman Empire mail box, with the newest commemorative stamp of the Emperor stuck on the upper right-hand corner of the envelope, but more likely having someone make the journey to hand-deliver the letter to his addressees. For example, we know that a woman named Phoebe, who Paul described as a deacon and a benefactor of his, was probably the person who carried Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome.

Now, today, I want us to try to imagine what it would have been like when the believers in Colossae received this letter that we've been reading. (Remember the homework assignment I gave you last week? Okay, this time you don't have to raise your hands.)

It's very possible that this wasn't the first letter they had received from Paul. Maybe this was a response to a letter that they had sent to Paul. In my imagination, I doubt that this letter was a "one-shot deal," even though it's all we have to read today. This letter may well have been part of an on-going correspondence between the great apostle and missionary and this group of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

When the letter arrived, the church secretary wouldn't have gone to the copy machine and made 100 copies to distribute or put it in the parish newsletter. No, it's likely that the letter would have been read aloud to a gathering of all the believers. They would all have heard it for the first time together.

Can you imagine the excitement and anticipation they must have felt? Maybe they had been anxiously waiting for a response to a previous letter that had been sent to Paul, seeking his advice and counsel. Or, maybe this letter was totally unexpected, a surprise.

I can just imagine the conversation among the believers.

Have you heard? Paul has sent us a letter! Don't forget our meeting tomorrow. You'll want to be there to hear it. I can't wait. See you then.

And, then after the letter was read, can you imagine the conversation it must have generated?

Think about it...what if this congregation – those of us here at St. Anne's - had a personal, on-going correspondence with a great spiritual leader...Billy Graham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Presiding Bishop, the Pope, you pick the one that works best for you. I'm guessing we'd all be pretty excited about it.

I can imagine that was the kind of excitement that surrounded the reception of the Letter to the Colossians that we've been reading.

Now, letter writing in the first century was very much an art and followed set patterns and forms. And, Paul was very much an artist when it came to letter-writing. First, there would be a greeting, followed by a thanksgiving and a prayer for the letter's recipients. That is the portion of the letter that we read last week.

The body of the letter would fall in two sections. The first section was doctrinal or theological. The second section would provide practical advice and encouragement based on the doctrinal argument. Finally, there would be messages to friends and co-workers and a benediction.

The portion of the Letter that was read today is from the doctrinal section of what Paul wrote. It begins:

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him...

There are two important pronouns here – you and he. Just who were the “you” and “he” that Paul was talking about, and what did he have to say about them?

He is Jesus...the Beloved Son...the Christ.

Paul gave us his answer to the question of who Jesus was in the six verses that come right before our reading for today.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or

dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Jesus is the full image of God. All things were created through him and creation will find its end in him. He is the reconciler. The one who has made us friends with God; the one who has restored us to the relationship with God that was intended since creation. He is the Lord of all...over thrones and dominions and rulers and powers. His power is ultimate in the universe.

In Paul's beautiful, rich, and poetic answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" we hear a foreshadowing of the Nicene Creed, which we will pray in a few minutes.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...God from God...begotten not made... of one being with the Father...Through him all things were made...For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven...He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

And, we hear the words of the great hymns of the faith.

Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne.

Crown Him the Son of God, before the worlds began.

**Crown Him with many crowns, as thrones before Him fall;
Crown Him, ye kings, with many crowns, for He is King of all.**

Crown Him the Lord of lords, who over all doth reign.

All hail the power of Jesus' Name!

Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown Him Lord of all.

And, what about the “you” in today’s reading?

The “you” were the faithful brothers and sisters in Colossae to whom Paul was writing. They were the ones who had once been estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, who (Jesus) had now reconciled in his fleshly body through death. They were the church...those who gave evidence that God’s redemptive work had already been begun by Jesus. They were the church...the body of Christ in the world...the place where God’s redeeming work on earth, begun on the cross and at the empty tomb, was to continue.

And, I think the “you” was us, too. Paul was writing to the Colossian Christians. But, I believe that this Letter was included in the canon, because he was writing to us, too. To Christians in a time and place that Paul couldn’t even have imagined back in the first century.

Who is Jesus? Who are the people Paul is writing to?

In 2007, in Lee’s Summit, we know the answers to these questions. But, I wonder, do we almost know the answers too well? Have we repeated the Creed and sung the hymns so often that we miss the power we are talking about? Have we called ourselves the body of Christ so many times that we don’t even really register what that means any more?

Could we possibly put ourselves back on Colossae, in Asia Minor, in the first century, with those early believers, hearing these words for the first time? Could we possibly capture the sense of power and wonder and excitement that these words must have brought to those faithful brothers and sisters in Christ?

If we can't, I fear that we may miss a whole lot. We may miss what it means to serve a Lord who is all powerful yet who understands creation perfectly because he was the agent of creation. And, I fear we may miss what it means to be the body of Christ, to be the church, to be the place of God's redeeming work in the world today.

In the fall of 2005, Alan Jones, the Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, came to All Saints' Parish in Austin, the place where I was doing my field placement for seminary, to give a series of lectures. Dean Jones is a tall, slim, stately man with a beautiful white beard and a charming British accent. He is a man of deep spirituality; you have no doubt of that when you are in his presence. He is well-read, well-written, and well-spoken. His off-the-cuff remarks typically sound more intelligent than those most of us have worked to compose for many hours, and his vocabulary makes me feel like I really don't even speak the English language. Of course, that might also be his great British accent at work, too.

But, on with my story...

On the first day of Dean Jones' visit, there was a luncheon for a small group of students, professors, priests, and others. The Dean had no prepared remarks...just an informal time of questions and answers.

It wasn't long before one of the luncheon guests began quizzing Dean Jones about his thoughts on open communion...the practice of allowing anyone who wishes to receive it to take communion whether or not they have been baptized. I don't want to put words in the Dean's mouth, but I think it would be reasonable to say that he has no problem with open communion, defined that way. Those who are seeking God in Christ should be welcome at Christ's table just as those who have already made up their minds and are baptized believers.

The questioner took issue with this position in a fairly passionate way. She finally said firmly, "Well, there has to be some difference believers and non-believers!"

Dean Jones stood for a moment very quietly, then he said, "Frankly, I'm not all that impressed by believers." And, with those words, that part of the conversation quickly ended.

I've thought a lot about his statement in the intervening time. "Frankly, I'm not all that impressed by believers."

Again, I don't want to put words in Dean Jones' mouth, but I think he was trying to say that much of the time he just doesn't see a lot of difference between believers and non-believers.

Unfortunately, when I look at myself as a believer, I think he may have been right.

In Lee's Summit, in 2007, we believe that Jesus is still the full image of God. We believe that Jesus is still supreme over all. We believe he is still the creative force and the powerful Lord of the universe.

In Lee's Summit, in 2007, we are the church, those who have been reconciled; we are the test case of God's redemptive work in Christ; and we are the place meant to bring redemption to the rest of the world.

It's powerful and exciting stuff.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if those around us looked at us and did see a difference? Wouldn't it be wonderful if those around us looked at us and said simply, "They must be believers...they are the body of Christ in the world"?

AMEN.