

Colossian 1:9-14
Walking and Praying in the Spirit

Michelle Drewitz
July 22, 2018

Riverdale Baptist Church
Whitehorse, Yukon

“Transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others”. This is the church visioning statement that RBC leadership developed in conversation with Sam Breakey following our church health initiative in May. This is an initial statement, to be developed and explored further in conversation with the church in the fall. This morning I’d like us to consider how this kind of transformation takes place, according to the Bible, before we as a church discuss the practical goals and ways this will look.

Transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others is, to use Biblical language, about becoming mature in Christ, it is about becoming whole and complete.

Paul the Apostle wrote a letter to the church in Colosse which is known as the New Testament book of Colossians. The main emphasis of his letter is found in 1:28-29 – “*We proclaim [Jesus Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I – Paul - labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*” The word we translate as perfect is *teleios* in Greek. It means mature, whole, full grown, of full age, complete in all its parts, especially concerning completeness of Christian character. The imagery that comes to mind is of fruit that has reached maturity, wholeness, full growth, completeness. My parents are here visiting from the Okanagan. And they brought with them some delicious fresh Okanagan fruit for me to enjoy: cherries and apricots and peaches. This week I sat in my church study with a huge bowl of cherries, working away at this sermon and realized how those tasty fresh cherries exemplify what it means to reach maturity. There was a long process of transformation; from seed to tree to bud and blossom to fruit that was ripe.

These cherries were picked at just the right time, not too early and not too late. They had undergone an incredible process of transformation, of maturing, to reach completion, teleios.

So the goal of Paul's letter, the goal of Paul's ministry, the goal for the church in Colosse is that the believers would reach wholeness, maturity in Christ, or, to put it in RBC's language, it is "the transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others."

Not only is this the goal of Paul but this is also clearly the goal of the Triune God; the goal of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to make us whole, to give us life, to bring us to perfection, to completion, to maturity, to transformation. So the entire book of Colossians is towards this end – the transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others.

Throughout Paul's letters, we gain an insight into his understanding of what it means and looks like to be mature in Christ, we get a glimpse into his theology of what it means and looks like to be a maturing Christian, we recover a proper perspective of what it means to have our identity in Christ. For Paul, maturity in Christ as a Christian happens through the Holy Spirit. This is clear from Paul's repetition throughout all his letters on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual believer and in the life of the gathered community of believers – the church. After all, Paul understood the Holy Spirit to be the actual presence of God in and among His people.

Believers experience the Holy Spirit as the empowering presence of God among us. The Holy Spirit enables God's people to properly live as God's people on earth, to live in the tension that God's Kingdom began in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but is not yet fully consummated until the day Jesus Christ returns. So to be people who walk in step with the Holy

Spirit means to be the people of God who live as Kingdom of God people on earth, in that here but not yet tension. To be people who walk in step with the Holy Spirit means to be people whose hearts are being transformed. To be people who walk in step with the Holy Spirit means to be maturing Christians, becoming whole and complete in Christ.

So since the Holy Spirit is indeed God's personal presence among us, then what distinguishes God's people as God's people – what identifies me as a Christian and what identifies RBC as the church, the gathered community of believers – is the experience and presence of the Holy Spirit in and among us. After all, it is the Holy Spirit in us which brings us to faith in Christ and it is the continuing presence and work of the Holy Spirit in us which brings us to completion, to perfection, to maturity, to transformation. This is why, for Paul, the most crucial aspect in the life of the Christian is the presence of the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit distinguishes someone as a disciple of Christ. This is why, for Paul, he repeats the exhortation to the church to continuously walk in step with the Spirit.

There is much that can be said about Paul's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual believer and in the life of the church. This morning, though, I will focus on one aspect of walking in step with the Holy Spirit, according to Paul. Most of us know that Paul the Apostle was a missionary. Paul the Apostle was a theologian. Paul the Apostle was a pastor. Paul the Apostle was a church planter. Paul the Apostle was an evangelist. But before he was a missionary or a theologian or a pastor or a church planter or an evangelist, he was someone who prayed. His relationship with the church and with Christ was always sustained by prayer.

Paul grasped that prayer is an activity inspired by God himself, through his Holy Spirit. So to live a life without prayer is, for all intents and purposes, a life of practical atheism. A life without prayer is to live as though God does not exist. Walking in the Spirit begins with prayer because prayer is the deepest expression of our identity in Christ – of recognizing that we live in the time where God’s Kingdom has begun on earth but not yet been brought to completion. Prayer is the most practical way, in our everyday lives, that we acknowledge to ourselves and to God that we depend on God.

To walk in the Spirit means to be the transformed people of God. The starting place for walking in step with the Holy Spirit is prayer. So let’s turn now to the book of Colossians.

I want you to pause and notice for a moment how Paul begins his letter to the church in Colosse. It’s the same way he starts his letter to the church in Ephesus or to the saints in Philippi or to the church of the Thessalonians. Paul opens his letter to the church in Colosse through thanksgiving and prayer. He doesn’t begin by immediately discussing theology or instructing the saints or encouraging them or disciplining them or addressing a concern or issue. He begins his letter, a letter which focuses on how to become mature in Christ, with thanksgiving and prayer. In doing so, Paul is reminding us that the kind of transformation we need, the kind of maturity we desire, the kind of Christian growth for which we strive doesn’t come from our knowing the right things, doesn’t come from our trying harder to be better, doesn’t come from being punished, doesn’t come from our own energy and will power and resoluteness. Our becoming mature and transformed begins with God’s action in us.

You see, Paul begins his letter, in verse 5 by thanking God for the faith, hope, and love that is evident among the Colossians. Paul does not congratulate the saints of Colosse. Paul doesn't say to the Colossians – well done for having faith and showing love to one another and for being full of hope and for bearing fruit and growing. Instead Paul thanks God because God is causing faith, hope, and love to grow, God is causing the fruit to grow. God is working a miracle through the gospel of Jesus Christ in Colosse: people are trusting God, people are loving one another, people are alive with hope in the midst of a troubled world. And this, Paul understands, is always a miracle. It is a miracle wherever there is faith, hope, and love.

So the focus of Paul's letter is wholeness in Christ, maturity in Christ, it is about transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others. We saw that he starts his letter with thanksgiving to God for working the miracle of faith, of hope, and of love. Then notice what he does next. Paul does not then tell the Colossians to do anything. Paul does not exhort the Colossians to try harder to be whole, to be mature or to be transformed. Paul does not tell the Colossians to try something new to be whole or mature. Paul does not tell the Colossians to keep on doing what they're doing because they're on the right track.

Instead, Paul prays for the Colossians. Paul asks God to bring them to wholeness and maturity and transformation. Paul knows what I sometimes forget. Paul, who desires maturity for the Colossians knows that we cannot become mature or whole or transformed on our own.

After all, if we could achieve our wholeness, our maturity, our transformation, if we could become the person we desire to be – whole, mature, transformed in Christ – then why does Paul

pray? If the Colossians could learn the proper theology, or just work harder to be more loving, or simply change their attitude, then why does Paul pray? Why doesn't Paul use some theological arguments or give them instruction? Because Paul knows what I sometimes forget – that my transformation, that my maturity doesn't come from me knowing the right things or trying harder. It starts with God working in me.

Perhaps as disciples we neglect to pray because we think we can – or, more accurately, we think we should become whole and mature and transformed all by ourselves. We think we should have the answers, have the resources, have the ability within us, have the fortitude and strength and insight ourselves. So we don't pray because we think we can, or should become whole on our own. This is the great myth that culture teaches us. Self-help books promise self-improvement by trying harder, thinking differently, using internal resources, by changing yourself independently. But Paul doesn't believe that nor does he teach that to the church in Colosse.

No, instead Paul says you can't reach maturity or completeness or perfection or transformation by yourself. Paul knows we cannot become whole and mature and transformed on our own. So Paul asks God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Instead of Paul instructing the Colossians to put forward all their effort and just make it happen, Paul prays. Instead of Paul giving them a list of five steps to do to change their behaviour or their thinking, Paul prays. Paul deeply wants the church to become mature and whole and he knows the only way it can happen is through the presence of the Holy Spirit. So he prays.

In his prayer in 1:9-14, we see him praying for four things, four things that will help the church and the individual reach maturity in Christ:

One, verse 9: *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.* Paul's first prayer request is that God would fill the saints in Colosse with the knowledge of his will, that God would enable us to fully comprehend God's will.

Now, God's will has a double focus: it refers to God's will for the whole world and it refers to God's will for the individual. God's will for the world is his overarching plan and God's will for our individual lives is found within his overarching plan. So Paul first prays that we would come to grasp God's plan for the world. That we would come to know and understand God's big story as told by the Bible. It is the story that starts in Genesis with the story of creation and the choice of humankind to be autonomous, to choose to trust self instead of choosing to trust God. And then it grows into a story that demonstrates God's love for the world – to rescue and redeem and restore his creation to wholeness and to fullness the way it was created to be. It is the great story of good triumphing over evil, of light shining in the darkness.

Paul's prayer reminds us that when we understand God's story, when we get swept up into that marvellous story of redemption and recreation, we get transformed. So we ask God to fill us up with his story and all it means and provides for us. And we ask to be shown how each of our individual stories fit into God's great big plan. How do our individual lives – as mother or father, teacher or nurse, tradesperson or artist, grandparent or child - fit in God's big story for the world.

The only way that we can discern God's will for our individual lives and for the life of the church is through the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. Because Christian living is about righteousness then sometimes God's will for us is to speak and sometimes it is to be silent. Sometimes God's will for us is to bear another's load and sometimes it is to let someone carry their own load for the sake of their growth. Thus only dependence on the Holy Spirit can enable us to know the will of God for our lives in a given situation or decision. Instead of Paul instructing the saints in Colosse about what to do for their transformation, Paul prays they would know the will of God and, in doing so, Paul reminds them of the gift of the Holy Spirit for discernment.

Two, verse 10: *And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.* If the first prayer request is to understand God's will – to understand God's big story and how our individual story fits within that story; then naturally the second prayer request is that we would live a life worthy of the Lord. Traditionally, we translate worthy in the sense of moral worthiness. But the Greek word here is a differently nuanced word which actually means suitable or congruent with, it is suitable because it is recognized as fitting. So Paul is praying that we would live a life that is suitable to the will of God. That we would live a life that fits with the grand plan, the big story of God. That we would live a life that is congruent and proper to the author of our story.

Remember, this is Paul's prayer. Paul is not commanding the Colossians to get with the program and live worthily. He does not exhort them to try harder to live a good life. Paul instead prays

because Paul knows what we sometimes forget – that we need the Holy Spirit to live a life that is in keeping with God’s story and God’s will. You and I can’t figure it out on our own.

Paul identifies two signs that affirm we are living a worthy life, a life suitable to God and congruent with his plan: *bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God*. Bearing fruit means to be formed in the image of Christ and behaving righteously. Knowledge of Christ refers to knowing Christ, to be preoccupied with Christ. We know that our hearts are transformed when we are being formed in the image of Christ and when we are preoccupied with things of God.

Three, verse 11: *Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience*. The goal of Paul’s letter is wholeness and transformation for the church. Paul began his prayer asking that we might come to know God’s will – both his will for the world and for us as individuals. Then Paul prayed that we might live a life that is in keeping with that will, congruent to God’s story. Now Paul prays that God would give us the resources to live according to his will. We don’t have the resources on our own to live according to God’s will and we don’t have the resources on our own to become transformed. We need God to give us what we need. What we need is strength and power.

The Greek word for power here is used 120 times in the New Testament and refers to the power that was at work in and through Jesus Christ himself – the power that healed the sick, the power that raised Christ from the dead, the power by which Jesus submits all things to himself. Paul prays that we would be strengthened with that same kind of power. Paul then lists two reasons

why we need that kind of strength and power to live according to God's plan: we need power for endurance and power for patience. The Greek word for endurance refers to a steadfastness dealing with difficult circumstances. It is about enduring through loss, unemployment, change, sickness. The Greek word for patience refers to a steadfastness dealing with difficult people. It is about facing criticism, unkindness, hostility, deceit, betrayal. Paul prays that we might have the strength and power to overcome tough circumstances and tough persons; that no circumstance or person would be able to defeat us from living according to God's will. We need endurance and patience as part of our process of transformation of heart.

Four, verse 12: *joyfully giving thanks to the Father*, sometimes translated as *giving joyful thanks*. Thanksgiving is one of the most significant expressions of maturity in Christ. One of the signs that our heart is transformed in relation with Christ and others is that we live in and out of gratitude. Notice what Paul the Apostle focuses on in the last few verses: he focuses on what has been accomplished through Jesus Christ. So we live out of gratitude especially for what has been done in Christ – for that big story of redemption and reconciliation in Christ. We live out of gratitude for God's plan for the world, his plan for the church and his plan for our individual lives.

Paul has brilliantly come full circle in his prayer for maturity and transformation. He began by praying that we would understand God's will, the story of God. Then he prayed that we would live a life suitable to God's story of redemption. Then Paul asked for strength and power to overcome difficult circumstances and difficult people as we live according to God's will. And now Paul prays that we would be joyfully giving thanks for God's story, for what God is doing,

for his will! We give thanks when we know and understand what he's done, especially what he's accomplished through Christ.

How often do I, when I notice faith in action, when I notice believers demonstrating love to another, when I see fruit, give thanks to God for what He is doing? How often do I recognize that God is the source, rather than human strength or motivation or energy or power? As we notice God at work among us, the simple exclamation of thanksgiving to God would perhaps go a long way towards reminding one another that the Holy Spirit, God's presence, is among us. So when we notice the miracles of faith, of hope, and of love, let us give thanks to God for what He has done. Let us help one another to notice how the Holy Spirit is already working among us.

Transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others. Our transformation, our maturity, our growth, our completeness, our perfection happens when we walk in step with the Holy Spirit. The starting place for walking in step with the Spirit is prayer. The starting place for our transformation is prayer. It is praying that we would come to know, grasp, and be caught up in God's great plan for the world and our individual lives – a plan that includes restoration, hope, renewal, recreation, redemption, reconciliation. It is praying that we would live a life that is congruent or suitable to God's plan. It is praying that we would have the strength and great power to live according to God's will. It is praying for endurance to deal with difficult circumstances and patience to deal with difficult persons. It is praying that we give joyful thanks to God for what he has done, particularly what he has done in Christ for us. May this be our prayer for one another as we seek transformation of the heart in relation with Christ and others.