

Sermon July 24 2022 Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 2:6-19 (*The Message* paraphrase)

⁶⁻⁷ My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

⁸⁻¹⁰ Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.

¹¹⁻¹⁵ Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve. It's not a matter of being circumcised or keeping a long list of laws. No, you're already *in* – insiders – not through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin. If it's an initiation ritual you're after, you've already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of your old life; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ. When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive – right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ So don't put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days. All those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ.

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are. They're completely out of touch with the source of life, Christ, who puts us together in one piece, whose very breath and blood flow through us. He is the Head and we are the body. We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us.

SERMON: The Rev. Brent Damrow

I got stuck in that reading very quickly. Simple and straightforward, he says. When it comes to church, when it comes to faith, unfortunately, simple and straightforward are rarely the adjectives that come to mind. And that is too bad. Christ has come to us. So let us live in him. That is the simple message, not just of this passage, but of the whole Bible. Simple and straightforward. And yet how complicated we often make it.

It was in a room very much like our sanctuary the last time everything felt quite that simple and straightforward for me. To be fair, maybe it was because I wasn't in charge of this stuff; I got to just come and be. Maybe it was because at that time, my heart and the heart of everyone around me was so excited about a new journey, a new jumping off place to what yet might be. But it was a room very much like our sanctuary. There were clear windows just like ours that let the world in and let our imagination out. Just like ours, it was a room filled with music, glorious music, three different kinds of organs, two pianos. And voices that, yes, made a joyful and a glorious noise, too. In that room, just like ours, there are the same symbols: a font, a table, a Bible, nods to history and to this present moment, too.

And of the seven days of the week, every single one of them except one, the room held worship, worship of all kinds, formal and traditional, some morning prayer, communion liturgies that set your heart on fire, readings in every language and from many different sources. Did I mention the singing? Oh, the singing. The goosebumps, the insights, the shared smiles, the shared tears, the place to come together when all is well and when the world was falling apart. A community of faith, choice, love, truth and beauty.

That room was Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School. And the people who gathered there remind me a whole lot of the people who gather here. It was a room where people chose to be, people of all ages, perspectives and approaches, but more importantly, people who wanted to be there, filled with the Spirit and alive. It was Yale, after all, so the room was full of knowledge. And yet, everyone was hungry for more. It was a divinity school, so it was a place at least theoretically full of faith. And yet, everyone was open for something deeper. It was a place that buzzed with life, yet discovered more of that life every time we came together.

The first verse of our reading today from *The Voice* paraphrase, the one that I shared with the kids, I think had a lot to do with it. Just to remind you, it went like this: "Now that you have welcomed Jesus, the Anointed One, into your lives, continue to journey with him, and allow him to shape your lives." In that room were faculty, were staff, were community members, and were, of course, us students, too. In one way or another, we had each welcomed Christ in. And I think that's a critically important word: "welcomed," not "chosen," not "agreed to," not "forced upon," not "guilted into," but welcomed.

Author Anne Lamott captures this sense of welcome, perhaps, the best, when she writes of her own moment of welcoming. In a troubled time of her life, she described Jesus like a cat, a cat that always wandered around, that always seemed to be hanging out just over her shoulder. That when she went to bed at night, seemed to cuddle up in the corner of her room. Stalking, she said it felt like, if that's appropriate to say about Jesus, but stalking it was. And one day, she finally took a deep breath, and she said, "Oh, fine, then. Just come on in!" And from that moment, she described her faith as opening up and her life as changing. My question to you is: You are here, but have you welcomed him yet? Or are you still chasing after a welcome? Because the truth is, friends, Jesus welcomed you a long time ago.

And then there's the second half of that verse, maybe the scarier one, the one we were all explicitly looking for, the one we were even spending significant money for: the chance to learn. The chance to continue to journey. The chance to be shaped. We came back to that room

practically every day, not out of obligation, but out of joy, out of possibility, and out of wonder. We came back every day because Yale Divinity School was smart enough to not program anything against the worship time. It was the center of our life together.

That opening hymn we sang today (“God the Sculptor of the Mountains”) is not the easiest to sing, especially outside, and especially lacking a great choir in front of us. But it of all the songs at Marquand Chapel, well maybe among the top five songs, was one that we came to know better and better, just as you sang it more and more confidently with each verse. There is the truth there in the opening stanza, “We are formless; shape us now.” An awesome mantra for worship on this day or any day, in this life or any life. And when we sang that hymn, our whole lives seem to come alive. It bounced off the stone floor and floated near the high ceiling. It became a bit of a creed and calling for us. When we sang “we are formless; shape us now,” we actually meant it. We yearned for it. We couldn’t wait for it. I think critical in that first verse is the notion that makes our faith so transformational. That when faith is embraced by us, it embraces us right back, not for a moment or a glimpse, but for a lifelong journey.

I don’t know how you reacted to Eugene Peterson’s writing in *The Message* paraphrase of today’s Scripture reading. It is very un-Bible-like in some ways. And that was Peterson’s point, that when people heard these words, gathered in a small community thousands of years ago, their hearts became alive. They wanted to know more. I do, though, have to quibble with a little bit of what Peterson wrote, even though I love the spirit behind it. He wrote that school is out. And while our kids might be the first to tell you it is, friends, in the school of faith, it never is. We are living, we are learning, not just to understand Christ, not even just to live *in* Christ. But did you hear how it was translated this morning: live *as* Christ. It is a both/and. As long as that welcome is extended to Christ and to neighbor, too.

But I think what Peterson is on to here is what Paul was writing all about. It’s the inherent and yet stunning challenge of bringing the fullness of who we are, yes of course our heart, our humbleness, our openness, but also the fullness of our mind, the fullness of our intellect, the fullness of our capacity, for that is what brings fullness to life. Paul, for his part, understood that it is impossible to live a life of faith without acknowledging what God has done for us. That it is always grace, that God is always creating and recreating, incarnate in Jesus, alive in the fire of the Spirit. For if we forget those things, church becomes our own doing, rather than the truth of what has already been done. And yet Paul himself in all of his writings constantly challenges every church he works with. Writing, by the way, all the letters in the plural, to collectively strive and work to embody faithful lives and to become. He says to all of us together that we are to work at our faith like going to the gym, like taking a walk, like getting on that bike, to keep working at our faith. And people responded.

Paul says watch out for those people that dazzle with words, which is pretty amazing because Paul does use dazzling words. He used amazing rhetoric. He spun webs that captured you, both with honesty of how short we fall but also fundamentally what the Cross means, and what the love of Christ on that cross shows. The people responded to his calling. They responded to his calling by doing what we did at Yale Divinity School – gathering together whenever and wherever they could to share in life’s fullness, to celebrate and weep together, to lift and be lifted, to find strength in and through the Gospel, with those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

For Paul knew what we know today, how strong the siren call of the human voice can be when that human voice is searching only for its own power, or for wealth to satisfy itself. And Paul knew how elusive and how sometimes foolish the wisdom of God is, especially with arms stretched wide on the cross to gather the whole world in, not for his sake but for the world's. Friends, if you welcome the one who welcomed you so long ago, are you ready to live the life free and clear that has already been given to you? I hope so.

Jake asked this morning when Sunday school would start again. I told him soon and very soon. We are about to start a new program year. In two weeks we about to welcome a new music maker, Peter Frost. The choir is going to be singing in the sanctuary again. Sunday school is going to be open. Study and service and learning and giving. And my question is: Are we ready to come back together, to renew our covenant. As Paul and Peterson write in this passage, to start living the beauty of our faith again, letting life spill over into nothing short of thanksgiving.

I cannot tell you folks on the lawn here how happy I am to see you. For over the last three years, our habit, our commitment, our willingness and our ability to be together has been challenged and compromised in many ways, both from the virus and – let's be honest – from convenience, too. Especially on a beautiful day like today, I understand the temptation to sit with coffee in our air conditioned home, or to remain in jammies with our beloved pets on one side and a paper on the other. And yet, I am all in with Paul that we together, we plural, we here, need to start living this stuff out loud together. We are communal creatures who learn best, live best, love best, become best when we are together.

This fall, friends, we're gonna live out loud! By committing ourselves to church, to not just living *in* Christ, but to live *as* Christ, by remembering the truth that Christ is already in us. We are going to do everything we can to come to him, even as we recognize that he has already come to us, stalking us in love. And we together, yes, *we* plural, will find our dead ends fading into new possibilities. What will they be? We will find our old guilt and grief nailed to the cross, that we need bear them no more. And it will be in our sanctuary, I promise you, there will be singing, there will be goosebumps, there will be insights, shared smiles and tears, a place to come together when all is well, and yes, when the world is falling apart. For once again, we will recommit ourselves to becoming a community of faith, of choice, of love, of truth, and of beauty. Not because *we* get it right, but because God nourishes us, God strengthens us, God shows us the way. And all we need to do, friends, is follow together.

Friends, in our sanctuary, may we be just like those that Paul wrote to. May we be just like those who will also be coming back to Marquand Chapel. May we be full of the knowledge of our faith, and yet always hungry for more. May we be full of love, and yet open to more. May we be full of life, yet discovering its greater fullness each time we gather. Never done learning even now and always becoming.

Friends, I don't know what you heard in the passage this morning, but I beg for you to read it, to listen to Paul, to listen to Peterson, not for fancy words or clever doctrine, but for the simple calling to start living together again. The only question I have is: What are we waiting for? Amen!