

BY THE WILL OF GOD

There are events mighty and amazing going on all around us. Most of you keep up with them better than I do. There are also books, television programs, plays, and concerts. There are organizations with excellent goals of almost every kind. And we can travel the globe to increase our knowledge and understanding of other countries, peoples, religions, and endless needs. Many of you travel farther in a normal month than the Apostle Paul did in an entire lifetime, and he was one of the most traveled people of his time. Most of us keep calendars and schedules of both responsibilities and opportunities that would have been flat out unbelievable to anyone in biblical times. Of course we are also scattered and stressed as a result. I suspect that both Paul and Jesus would be telling us today, if we had time to listen to them, that we cannot possibly live lives of serious faith and prayer with as many distractions and goals and expectations as we are willing to carry around with us at all times.

In any case, it has to occur to us: Why are we fooling around with this little letter to an insignificant village in Asia minor, written 1,956 years ago, when there are so many important things for us to be doing, studying, learning, paying attention to? I will try to not answer that question, and therefore I may lose some of you. On the other hand, after several weeks of sermons on Sunday and then class presentations, perhaps some of you will come to appreciate and honor Paul's letter to the Colossians. I do realize that some of you already do.

We will get into far more of the behind-the-scenes details in the classes than we will have time for on Sunday mornings. But perhaps a tiny overview is appropriate for this first sermon. Colossae was the smallest and most insignificant town that Paul ever wrote to. If we stop to wonder about that, it will give us some important clues about what is going on. Paul is at the tail end of his third missionary journey, so it is not inexperience or accident that causes him to write to the little church at Colossae. Now, you can get very different information from some scholars and commentaries than what you will hear from me. I will not deal with such things in this sermon series, though I will be dealing with them during class presentations. On Sunday mornings you will only get the straight story. To be sure, that will be only one man's conclusions, but you are used to that with me.

Some of you are already oriented, but I want to make sure. Paul's ministry as a Christian apostle ran for roughly thirty years. It went from his conversion in 33 A.D. to his death in 65 A.D. (Some say it was from 35 to 62 A.D., but still roughly thirty years.) Paul spent the first thirteen years getting prepared and reoriented. This period is frequently overlooked, but nearly everything Paul had believed or cared about was reworked in the light of his Damascus Road encounter with the Risen Jesus.

The second ten years were devoted to Paul's three missionary journeys, as they are usually called. The first journey to the region of Galatia was about 47 to 48 A.D. The second journey, centered at Corinth, was from 49 to 52. The third journey, centered at Ephesus, was from 52 to 57, if we include some significant side trips.

The third ten years, from 57 to 65 A.D. or so, began after Paul was in a serious riot in Jerusalem, held in his honor. For the rest of his life, Paul was under house arrest and waiting to go to trial, first in Caesarea and then in Rome. We know nothing for certain regarding his death. But from sheer silence, which is very unlike Paul, we surmise that Paul lost his case and was executed as an enemy of Rome. Nero had come to power and ended up blaming Christians as scapegoats for many things, especially for the great fire. I assume that Luke, Paul's very faithful friend, died with him and at the same time. As you know, the Book of Acts, which Luke wrote, does not end; it stops. Luke doesn't go on to tell us what happened to Paul, because he shared Paul's fate. At least that is my assumption. So back to our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Paul writes to Colossae primarily because of his friendship with Onesimus. Oh dear, a personal motive and purpose right in the middle of the New Testament? That is maybe not politically correct, but is it correct in Christendom? A relationship is the major reason for the letter instead of a general theological treatise. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it. Actually I like that very much. This is not Paul writing for the vague and general edification of vague and general people. This is Paul writing because he loves Onesimus, and because he cares about some real people who actually live in Colossae.

Cutting through the confusion: Paul is in prison at Ephesus, one hundred miles to the west of Colossae. Onesimus, a runaway slave, has somehow come into Paul's circle of influence. The two have become friends. Onesimus is now a convert to Christianity, and he has found

ways to be of significant help to Paul while Paul is incarcerated. It turns out that Onesimus is the slave of a man named Philemon. Philemon also happens to be a dear friend of Paul's. He is also the most prominent member of the church at Colossae, and the church meets in Philemon's house there. Obviously, then, this is not a megachurch. A handful of people in the little village of Colossae have responded and given themselves to the Message of God's love and purposes as revealed in Jesus Christ. They meet in Philemon's house to pray, sing, worship, and learn more, if they can, of the new Life now available to them. They are surrounded by all the old culture and its beliefs. Some of it they still adhere to. But there is a very new truth mixed in with all they see and know and believe now. And they want to know it, honor it, and live by it more and more.

Of course, Paul didn't sign up for this problem with Onesimus. He was just minding his own business, doing the best he could, trying to survive the ordeal at Ephesus. But all at once Paul is right in the middle of a dilemma. Has such a thing ever happened to you? The issues of slavery, Roman rule, honesty between Christians, and the fate of poor Onesimus all come crashing down on Paul – not to mention the repercussions for Onesimus, and the way this will affect all the Christian communities in the area. (Especially the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis, which are only a few miles from Colossae.)

After considerable prayer and pondering and trepidation, no doubt, we discover what Paul has decided. And clearly Onesimus has trusted Paul in this situation and is willing to go along with Paul's recommendations. So Paul writes three letters, two of which we have and the third one we maybe have. He sends these three letters with his trusted friend Tychicus, and his new friend Onesimus. Tychicus and Onesimus carry the letters personally up the Meander River and then the Lycus River to Laodicea and Colossae. One of the letters is the letter to Philemon, who we mentioned lives in Colossae. Paul wants everybody in Laodicea to read the Colossian letter, and he wants everybody in Colossae to read the letter he wrote to the Laodiceans.

Why is Paul eager to get everybody in the region involved with what he has written? Is it because Paul is so proud of what a great thinker and writer he is? Is it because he is trying to raise money, or trying to convert more people to Christianity? These might be great motives, but they have nothing to do with what Paul is trying to accomplish in this instance. He wants Philemon to forgive and free Onesimus and welcome

him as a brother Christian. And he wants Philemon to send Onesimus back to Ephesus a free man. Paul is pretty sure that this action will seem appropriate to all the Christians in the area, once they think about it and talk about it with each other. It matches the Gospel Message they have been enthralled by and want more and more to live by. Still, it is true that the surrounding culture will not see things in the same light. Very possibly that will make things quite difficult for the people of the New WAY. Knowing about the New WAY and living the New WAY are not the same thing, as we have all discovered. And no matter where we are in time, space, or history, our world does not like or agree with the New WAY. Hence the drama of the Christian Life for everyone who tries to live it.

So Paul wants every Christian in the area to be in on this – to help each other think and pray their way to the most Christian conclusions they can find. He especially wants the Christians in the area to support and strengthen Philemon in this potentially hazardous situation. The personal letter to Philemon will line this out in powerful and specific ways. The sheer presence of Onesimus will bring the issue front and center to the larger community. Some people notice that the letter to the Colossians deals with slavery quite enough to get everybody thinking about the issues, and the principles behind them.

And here is what lots of people miss: None of this could or would have happened if Jesus had not been right in the middle of it. It is our resurrected Lord who is inspiring and directing it – and yes, through imperfect human filters. Yet Jesus is at the center of all these relationships: between Paul, Onesimus, Philemon, Tychicus, and all the members of the churches involved, down to the least and last of them. That is stunningly obvious when we stop to think about it. And that is what gives us hope for our own churches and our own relationships.

So back to the letter to the Colossians: *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful followers of Christ at Colossae. Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”*

Is it so familiar that it no longer registers? Paul is making some incredible claims. They may sound familiar to us, but they rocked, angered, and sometimes inspired the people of Paul’s own time. *“An apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”* Half of that first sentence is audacious in the extreme. The other half is intolerable blasphemy ... unless, of course, it happens to be true. And who is to say? How can

it be proved or documented or tested? On whose authority can Paul's apostleship be questioned or ratified? Paul's claim to be an apostle is outrageous. Most of the people Paul is talking to questioned it at the time, and many of them rejected it outright. On the other hand, Paul is not even putting this on the level of ordinary councils or human gatherings of the church or synagogue. "*By the will of God,*" he says.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." "Apostle" is a big word in the early church. I think most of you know this. A disciple is one under discipline – a learner. A disciple is like an apprentice, a hopeful future master of some trade. And if the disciple/apprentice pays attention and practices diligently under the master craftsman, one day he may become a master craftsman himself: a carpenter, mason, rabbi, brain surgeon, or whatever. An apostle is a disciple who has become proficient. And an apostle is the carrier of a message – a truth – not a trade. An apostle is a living message-bearer just as an epistle is a written message-bearer. An apostle carries the message – the teaching of a master – and with all the skill, understanding, and authority of the master from whom he learned it.

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ" is an audacious claim indeed. "I carry the Message of Jesus as if I were Jesus himself talking to you." We need to get the full impact without getting carried astray. Paul is certainly not claiming equality with Jesus. He is claiming that he carries the Message of Jesus clear and straight. He is saying, "You can learn from me what Jesus Himself was teaching and proclaiming." In many instances, it becomes abundantly clear that Paul is exceedingly humble, and that in fact he is exceedingly surprised at being chosen as a Message-bearer by Jesus, and for Jesus. However, part of Paul's awareness of being chosen as an apostle also forbids him from being apologetic or compromising about the Message. It is not *his* Message! Therefore he has no right to change it, minimize it, compromise it, or keep quiet about it. You have figured that out by now with your own apostleship, have you not?

Becoming an apostle is not all fun and games. At first blush it seems like a high compliment. It seems like the type of credentials and purpose that every Christian would long for. Is that why all of you have been so quick and straightforward about claiming to be apostles? The claim to be an apostle had Paul in hot water for the rest of his life, and not just with his adversaries, but with his fellow Christians as well. From the Damascus Road incident to the end of his life, Paul had no

choice but to claim his apostleship. But he also had hundreds and then more hundreds of people chiding him, scandalizing him, mocking him, and opposing him with all of their might. “You self-appointed liar. You didn’t know Jesus. You never followed Him. You were never accepted as a friend or fellow worker by any of the real disciples who actually did know Jesus. Now you’re trying to tell everybody what to believe and what it really means? You are not only wrong, but ridiculous!”

This was essentially the situation until long after Paul’s death. Over time, it seems that the sheer weight of the new followers who came into the churches that Paul founded eventually overrode the opinions and objections of more orthodox and respected Christians. For every new Christian who came into the church because of Peter or James or John, twenty or thirty came in because of Paul. So eventually Paul became known as the Great Apostle. Jesus once commented, “*By their fruits ye shall know them.*” Sometimes we forget to allow a little time for the fruit to ripen.

In any case, before making my real point, I wanted to remind you that being an apostle – being a genuine Message-bearer – is not a piece of cake, or an unmixed honor, or a comfortable credential that brings us trophies or material rewards from this world. It is imperative to get and keep this clear, or we will forever dilute and betray the Message. Apostles of Jesus Christ carry the Message of Jesus, not the anemic, watered-down, pretty little ditty that our world keeps trying to turn His Message into. “New lives for old.” If we are not transformed and in transformation, we do not yet hear or carry the Message.

Of course, any good Christian can tell you that Paul was carrying a very beautiful and uplifting Message, and that therefore he was joyful and delighted about being an apostle. There is much truth to this. I still note that Paul once commented: “*For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*” (I Corinthians 9:16-18)

I also note, as all of you have, that Paul was dauntless about being an apostle. He lived in an awareness so different from the world around him that it’s almost like he lived in a different realm. Jesus had lived in such an awareness before him. Jesus was so effective that it only took three years for His preaching and teaching to culminate in the Crucifixion. Three years for the so-called simple carpenter from Nazareth to earn the extreme ire of the leaders of the Jewish nation, and then raise it to fever

pitch. The story is told so briefly and simply that we are always doing a double take to catch up to the reality: Being the Message-bearer of God cost Jesus His life within three years. What can you do or say to go from being an unknown Galilean to Jerusalem's Public Enemy No. 1 in only three years? Was Jesus robbing banks, murdering women and children, or putting thousands of people out of work and out on the streets in His ruthless drive for personal power and wealth? It was worse than that: Jesus was giving people a powerful new HOPE. And it was changing them forever. Two very different realms are intersecting here, and none of the usual logic is adding up.

Paul was a little slower than Jesus. That is, his apostleship lasted longer, maybe around thirty years instead of three. But was he robbing banks and slaughtering women and children? No, but he was giving people the same new Hope. So what was the reaction? *"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"* Paul wrote this toward the end of his first twenty years of ministry. He still had ten years to go, and many new items would be added to this list.

Not that more were needed. Five times he received the forty lashes minus one. The "minus one" was supposed to show mercy. But many died from just one such lashing. The skin was badly flayed, and not with a sterilized whip. Infection was nearly inevitable. Apparently Paul's immune system was incredible. Can you imagine what his back must have looked like? It would have been one big mass of scar tissue.

In *The New Church*, we will get more personal, from time to time, than in normal churches. We have to if we really want to walk this PATH, and if we want to be of any help to each other. If you are a Christian, you must become an apostle too. Isn't that right? Most of us have our share of suffering just because we are alive on a broken and imperfect planet. But what about the other dimension going on all around us? Are we also suffering because we are the special Message-bearers of the Christ?

A tricky and difficult question. At least I know that it makes me uncomfortable to ask it very clearly. God loves us and wants us to have abundant LIFE. That is what Jesus promised us. His own life was short but also abundant. In faith we believe that Jesus' life is now abundant beyond all imagining. *"He sitteth at the right hand of God."* That doesn't really describe it for us, but it certainly points in a huge, suggestive direction.

Paul's life was abundant too, in many ways, while he was still here on earth. He had a remarkable number of friends. And however much he was going through, it is clear that Paul was enthralled by and excited about what he was part of and about all the people who were responding. What about us?

When I have taught and preached and gone about my apostleship, I have certainly encountered much appreciation – far more than I ever deserved, at least from my perspective. In every parish I tried to serve, there were more people hungry and eager for the Gospel than seemed obvious or even possible at first. In my case they never came in droves. But they came in twos and fives. And often they seemed to come out of nowhere, and fast enough to keep some others from throwing me out and closing down the ministry that was taking place.

Certainly there were threats along the way. Some people hated me, tried to discredit me, told lies about me, accused me of all manner of evil. Back in Redlands days, the hate mail and some of the phone calls to the church office were so threatening that the police were concerned for my life. They came to my door and asked me not to sit in front of my study window, and they patrolled the neighborhood continually for weeks.

Other people were less noisy, but they worked quietly behind the scenes to stop what I was working to build, and to turn other people's opinions against me. I am certainly used to anger and insults and people leaving the church. But I have never been lashed, beaten, stoned, thrown into prison, or crucified. So of course I wonder: How could I have been an apostle for fifty-odd years and never suffered more because of it? How cautious and ineffective I have been, to have ducked the repercussions so consistently. Sometimes I say in my prayers: "I am sorry, Lord, that I have been so mild and uncourageous that I have not helped to build Your Kingdom more. And please do not make me more courageous now." Bad prayers, I'm afraid.

So how are you doing with *your* questions? You are an apostle of Jesus Christ, I know. Probably like me, you are better on some days than on others. Do you ever worry about carrying the Message so tentatively or so diluted that it doesn't cause more turmoil and travail in your life?

The first thing – the hard thing, the imperative thing – is for each of us to accept our apostleship. Audacious in the extreme, it is still an appointment we receive from another. Not our idea. “*Go ye into all the world ...*” And we have to discover how that applies to us personally: to our gifts and abilities; to our personality styles; to our circumstances and capabilities. But there is *always* an application. And I believe we all feel it either “loud and clear” or nibbling at the corners of our consciousness.

To set our apostleship in motion, we have to acknowledge and claim it. Paul puts it out there with unbelievable boldness: “*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.*” Incredible! Is it time for you to become incredible too? Name your name, and put it in the proper setting and context of your relationship with Jesus: *an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.*

It is in print, here in Colossians, and hard to miss, though many miss it. Paul claims the authority he has for his incredible statement: “*by the will of God.*” The link between God and Jesus is clear to Paul, and it is indisputable as far as he is concerned. The link between his experience on the Damascus Road and the will of God is also indisputable in his opinion and in his life. No other authority is believable to him because he has tracked and traced it. He is an apostle by the will of God. Of course, that is why no earthly authority can outrank or stop or silence his apostleship. “Do you have a problem with my apostleship?” he seems to say. “Take it up with God. It was God's idea, not mine. Meanwhile, I have a life to live for Him.”

You are an apostle. At least you have been given the position and the assignment. That is not in doubt. How you claim it and go about it – that is always in doubt for us humans. But it is one of the great fascinations of life, as it is also one of life's greatest opportunities. So let us be clear: Everyone in *The New Church* is an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God. Now all we have to do is help each other figure out what to do about it.