

Introduction

Are you what they call in America “a HISTORY BUFF? That means do you read history and delight in making connections between the lessons of old and today? I chose not to be a history major in college because I thought history was a boring collection of dusty, old facts and events that were irrelevant. I was short-sighted. C.S. Lewis is wiser. He said:

“We need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different period and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be described by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.” (C.S. Lewis *The Weight of Glory*, ‘Learning in war-time, 1939, pp. 28-29).

A lesser known writer, Sydney Harris, says “People are fond of saying that ‘the past is dead,’ but it is actually the future that is dead – and we make it come alive only by applying what we have learned from the living past to the present.” *Quotable Quotations* by Lloyd Cory, Victory Books, 1985, p.178)

And these last two quotes:

“Those who have no record of what their forbears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of history and biography.” Carter G. Woodson.

And “If history were taught in the form of stories it would never be forgotten.” Rudyard Kipling.

The Bible agrees with these quotes. Romans 15:4 says “*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scripture we might have hope.*” Much of the content of our scriptures are, indeed, stories that will not be forgotten. They provide great inspiration and are timeless, when we apply them to our lives in the 21st century.

The stories that are the theme of our service today are the stories of members of the early church who were part of Paul’s team in Rome. These diverse Christians were united in the bond of love and wanted to convey that love in Paul’s letters to the churches in Colossae and Ephesus. Looked at as a group, they provide a microcosm of the early church – and an inspiration for us in our day. I hope you will find yourself among the stories of these believers and can thus take your place in the ministry of the church today.

The over-arching theme of their stories is what a multigenerational, multicultural community based on Jesus Christ looks like.

When I chatted with Alex in HongKong this week, he talked about the importance of being part of a face-to-face community. For these past months he has polished his dissertation and is now just 1 step away from his JSD graduation, the PhD in law. But he has worked alone. So his emphasis on community is his heart longing to get reconnected. He considers us his home church and prays earnestly for all of us every day. He is anxious, as well, to meet those of you who are new this year. So he is praying he can find a faculty person who will sponsor him in the Chicagoland area to do post-doc research on law and religion as it relates to the house churches in China. With the catalogue of house churches attacked and under persecution just last Sunday, his research theme is a very timely and needed topic. He wants to do this post doc in our area so he can fellowship with all of us together, face by face, not just long distance. Alex loves the diversity of our church family and wants to reconnect again. He is part of a significant portion of our members back in their home countries who choose to stay connected with us and remain part of the mission and vision of the church.

This connection of believers with the global church is evident in the closing chapter of Colossians. The network of diverse, multicultural, multigenerational house churches throughout Asia Minor certainly set the early church apart. Jesus' first disciples were all of one ethnic background – different vocations to be sure – but one race. But when the church was birthed at Pentecost and then the Apostle Paul was called by God to the Gentiles, the early churches quickly became multicultural as both Jews and Gentiles believed in Christ.

The fourth chapter of Colossians lists some of the early Christians who were part of Paul's ministry and thus connected to the other house churches throughout their known world. Looking more closely at their list, we get a feel for the kinds of people – in race, vocation, and age – who led the early church.

Learning from them also provides a birds-eye preview for the new sermon series I will start next week. It came to me as I was preparing the Bible study for Thursday night on the external pressures that the disciples experienced with Jesus. In the sermon series, called *The Other Side*, we will look at Jesus's stories as they must have experienced them. As I went through Mark's story-telling narratives in his gospel, and tried to put myself in the disciples' shoes, it seems they had many pressures and stressors as Jesus kept upending traditions in their culture and religion and own expectations. This makes their stories very relevant in our pressure-filled, stressful lives today. We start that series next week.

The earliest disciples are the first generation of Christ's followers. The leaders mentioned in Colossians 4 are the second generation of Christ's followers. So let's get familiar with them – we will meet them in heaven, you know, since they are some of “the saints who from their labors rest” – the very saints we sang about in opening worship! (*For all the saints* hymn – Music by William How and Music by Ralph Vaughan Williams). They have much to teach us.

We start with some overview snapshots:

- There were 3 Jewish believers mentioned

- There were 3 Gentile believers mentioned

- There was at least 1 prayer warrior

- Three are called “dear colleagues, fellow laborers in the gospel” – some having shared much of the suffering Paul experienced

- There were 2 fellow-prisoners

- There were older and younger leaders and followers

- There were 3 who had failed in their role as a follower

But they all worked toward the same goal in God's kingdom despite their differing status and roles and even nationalities. They came from different regions and were involved in gospel work throughout Asia minor. It was their relationship with Jesus Christ and with Paul which bound them together into a community - across generations, across languages, across races, across ministry callings and across vocations. They were a very diverse group – like the church today. It seems they ministered in the bond of love from that place of strength and support. If they could model Christ's calling and work together, we can too.

Tychicus

Paul starts with Tychicus. He is the one who will carry Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, plus another letter to Philemon and a letter to the Ephesians (Eph.6:21). His name pops up 5 times in the New Testament accounts. From those times we learn that “he was a native of the province of Asia (Acts 20:4) and likely one of Paul's converts in Ephesus.” Possibly he witnessed “the great silversmiths' riot against Paul. He became one of Paul's companions, accompanying Paul on his trip back to Jerusalem, possibly “carrying with him the Ephesians' offering for the poor in Jerusalem. When Paul was arrested, Tychicus, along with Dr. Luke and others, stayed with Paul through the ‘thick and thin’ of his arrests and imprisonment in Caesarea, his dramatic appearance before kings

and governors, his miserable voyage and shipwreck en route to Rome and his residence in Rome awaiting trial.” (K. Hughes, Colossians Commentary, p. 142-143). Paul calls him *a dear brother, a faithful minister and a fellow servant in the Lord* (Col. 4:7). Those are all high accolades for this man. He was apparently trustworthy and dependable. Titus 3:12 and 2 Tim. 4:12 speak of how Paul sent him to Titus and in another instance to Ephesus. So Tychicus was like a right hand man to Paul, responsibly serving both Paul and the Lord. Plus, he seems to have the gift of encouragement as Paul said his bringing the letter and coming to Colossae would “*encourage your hearts.*” (Col. 4:8). I tell you, friends, everyone needs to partner with a Tychicus. I have a couple of those people in my life and I couldn’t fulfill my own calling from the Lord without them. They know who they are ☺. Can you be a Tychicus in someone’s life?

Onesimus

Col. 4:9 tells us that Tychicus traveled to Colossae with Onesimus. If Tychicus is at the positive end of the bar in terms of his character and personality, Onesimus is at the other end of the bar. He committed two serious crimes before he came to Rome. First, he robbed his master Philemon, so he had the money to travel and maybe even buy disguises and get himself to Rome, and second, he ran away from his master. He was a run-away slave who was apparently “dishonest, ungrateful, restless and insolent.” (Hughes, *Ibid.*, p. 145). In the world’s eyes and probably also the eyes of the new Christians in Asia, he was a failure. Yet he somehow came into contact with Paul while Paul was imprisoned and became a Christian. His conversion is so complete Paul now calls him “*our faithful and dear brother who is one of you* – one of you meaning from the area of Colossae. But faithful and dear? That’s huge. Onesimus before his conversion was anything but faithful, and trustworthy. Yet in the letter to his master Philemon Paul says “*Onesimus became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him – who is my very heart - back to you*” (Philemon:10-12). A failure, a disobedient run-away whom God redeemed, restored and completely changed.

That’s the gospel. What can we learn from Onesimus’s story, beloved? I can think of three lessons. First, Martin Luther says “we all are God’s Onesimuses.” As non-believers we have fallen short of or failed to meet God’s standard. And even as Christians most of us have failed God and His people in some major time in our lives. Yet God has shown mercy to us and continues to completely restore and empower us. So, being an Onesimus in the community is a wonderful reminder of God’s mercy and grace.

Second, Many of us naturally gravitate toward the Tychicuses among us. But God wants us to see who people can become in Him. Paul did this with this slave and in so doing gained a son who became *his very heart*. And third, when we meet “failures,” we often judge them and see them through that lens – not through the lens of God’s love. Onesimus may be a reminder of the beam in our own eyes. Let these lessons frame how we treat each other.

Aristarchus

Then in verse 10 (Col. 4) Paul pairs two more people who are part of the Christian community which surrounded him – Aristarchus and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. As in the duo of Tychicus and Onesimus, this duo is of one stalwart model of Christian commitment and another of failure. “Aristarchus is mentioned in Acts 19:29 as a Macedonian from Thessalonica who braved the riotous uproar in Ephesus with Paul. He also traveled with Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4) as one of the delegates from Thessalonica and then on to Rome (Acts 27:2). He was a faithful servant, a Jewish believer who threw aside his religious entitlements for the sake of the gospel (in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile), and served with Paul in his mission among the Gentiles.” (D. Garland, NIV Application Commentary, Colossians, pp. 277-278). Paul identified Aristarchus as a fellow prisoner. It is thought that when Paul was imprisoned involuntarily, members of the Christian community chose to take turns in being imprisoned with him voluntarily – so they could minister to him, help him as he dictated his letters, and be the presence of God with him in prison. Scholars believe Aristarchus was one of those

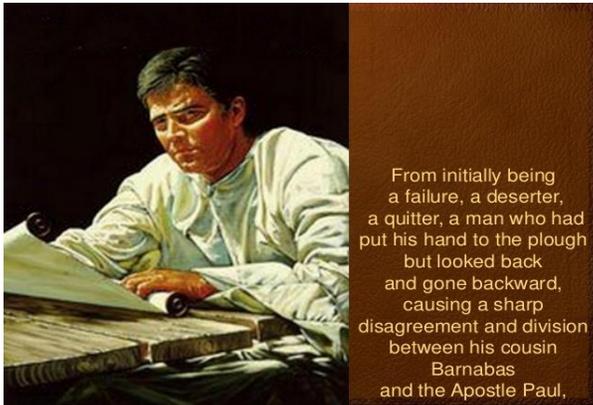
voluntary prisoners. He was one of three Jewish believers whom Paul named along with Mark and Justus as “*the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God. They have proved a comfort to me.*”v. 11.

Mark

But earlier Mark was not a comfort but a source of great disappointment to Paul. Mark had accompanied Paul and his uncle Barnabas on their first missionary journey in Cypress. But early on there was opposition by a Jewish sorcerer named Bar-Jesus. The encounter might have shaken Mark to the core. Listen to the story:

Bar-Jesus opposed the word of God and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Paul filled with the Holy Spirit looked straight at Bar-Jesus and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.’ Immediately mist and darkness came over him and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.”(Acts 13:8-11).

Couple that story with the certain “incredible hardships of the journey” (Hughes, Ibid.. p150) that young



Mark was undoubtedly unprepared to face, and Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas at Perga. He was failure, a deserter, a quitter, a man who had put his hand to the plough but looked back and gone backward. In fact, his failure serious repercussions for the gospel. Going back caused a sharp disagreement and division between his cousin Barnabas and the Apostle Paul. That affected the entire mission enterprise to the Gentiles. We never just act alone. Our failures can have wide rippling effects.

Nonetheless, early failure never needs to be our lasting legacy. Twelve years passed from Mark’s desertion to his appearing with Paul in the prison scene at Rome. In

those in-between years, his uncle Barnabas took him under his wing and together they returned to Cypress and preached throughout that country.(Acts 15:39). Barnabas was named the son of encouragement; he had a wonderful shepherding heart. He was also a team player so scholars think he chose to team up with his nephew to help restore him. We all need Barnabases in our lives! Now after 12 years Paul said John Mark “*is helpful to me in my ministry.*” (2 Tim.4:11). Mark’s youthful desertion had been absolved, and he had apparently been equipped and matured under his uncle’s shepherding. Historical records show he also then teamed up with the Apostle Peter and is the Mark who wrote the gospel bearing his name, from Peter’s perspective.

Let me repeat: Early failure never needs to be our lasting legacy. Just like in Onesimus’s case, God is the restorer of people. The Christian community who is experiencing “the bond of love” can be a showcase for these redemptive stories. Are you a Mark – before or after youthful indiscretions? Have you ever failed friends or family members or someone who is powerful in your community? Are you able to let the shame of the past go and move forward with the Lord and His people? The matured Mark became invaluable as a disciple for the early church. So can you for the church today. Just stay connected with older Christians who walk with the Lord and learn from them as you serve together with them.

Luke, Demas and Epaphras

Paul ends the book of Colossians talking about 4 other key members of his team – Luke the doctor, “*our dear friend,*”(Col.4:14), Epaphras, Demas and Archippus. Who is Dr.Luke? Like Tychicus he traveled with Paul after Philippi and like Aristarchus and Tychicus endured all the same sufferings

Paul describes in 2 Cor. 11 – *flogged severely, exposed to death again and again, beaten with rods, shipwrecked, constantly on the move, in danger from bandits, in danger from Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, in danger from false brothers.*” (2 Cor. 11:23-26). With Paul’s thorn in the flesh, some physical infirmity that is never quite defined, Paul needed a doctor as a companion! He was another faithful servant. It was Luke who also went on to become the author of both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. His is the only gospel written by a Gentile. He was an esteemed, priceless member of the Christian community. I’m sure his gifts of healing were vital to the health of the whole team.

Demas was not a priceless member of the Christian community, however. Paul gives him no affirmation in this letter to the Colossians and later in the last letter to Timothy says “*Demas has left me, having loved this present world*” (2 Tim.4:10). He seems to be a tragic failure whom we think did not get restored and become an on-going part of the Christian ministry.

Epaphras

But the team member who shines like a star by contrast is Epaphras.

Epaphras

Imitating Christ In Faithful Service

- **Preacher, Teacher, or Elder in Colossae**
 - “just as you learned it from...” (Col 1:7)
- **Informed Paul of the Colossian church’s strengths and need for help**
 - Col. 1:8, 2:8
- **Description**
 - Bond-Servant, Faithful Servant (Col. 1:7)
 - Bondslave of Jesus Christ (Col. 4:12)
 - Fellow Prisoner (Philemon 1:23)

An Imitator of Jesus Christ

Epaphras was also a prayer warrior:

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ¹³ I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Any Christian community is greatly blessed, empowered and protected by having one or more people like Epaphras in their midst – a servant who works hard for the growth and well-being of others and pours himself out in fervent prayer. “*He is always wrestling in prayer for you*” (v.12). Wrestling. “From the Greek word used here we get our English word ‘agonize.’.. It is the same root word used to describe Jesus’ fervent prayer in Gethsesame” (Hughes, *Ibid.*, p.151). Christian communities that have prayer warriors like Epaphras in their midst are blessed, guarded and protected communities, able to withstand the onslaughts of Satan. I count it a rare privilege to have some Epaphrases in my life and hope to be that for some of you. What about you? Will you take up the mantle of prayer warrior and be the defense from God against the attacks of Satan for this church? And other churches or Christians groups around the world?

Archippus

Finally, Epaphras came from Colossae and so I expect one of the targets of his prayer was the last person named in this list of luminaries. Archippus. Paul’s word to him was: *See to it that you complete (the work you have received in the Lord.*” Col.4:17. That word complete means ‘keep on filling something full.’ Scholars believe that Archippus was a young up-and-coming leader in Colossae whom Paul is strongly encouraging to fulfill the call that God had put on his life. Kent Hughes says of him “From Philemon verse 2 many deduce that Archippus was [actually] the son of Philemon and

Apphia. Perhaps Epaphras told the apostle of Archippus' budding spiritual life and potential." So Archippus is the face of young leaders who, when they are equipped and learning to fulfill the responsibility given them, will eventually be able to lead the Christian church. A goal for many of you here today.

This is the roster of the Christian community who were part of Paul's team in Rome – a multigenerational, multicultural group of people with different gifts and calling from the Lord who had become bound together in love and wanted to share that love and encouragement with the new believers at Colossae. A Christian community in microcosm.

Discussion

What do you make of this group of people, beloved? What do you learn from their diversity and yet ability to all work toward the same goal together? How do any one of them resonate with you in the role God wants you to play in the church?

We have the privilege at New Hope to model a similar diverse, multicultural, multigenerational body of believers. I pray the world will see Christ in us as we grow, serve and support one another – one in the bond of love. Amen.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 9/16/18