

New Hope Sermon A Global witness - Colossians 1:1-8

I was really delighted to see the front page article, complete with this picture blown up to a large size, in the *Chicago Tribune* on Saturday May 26th. The woman is Sister Jean and the story was about her role as the chaplain and spiritual mom for the Loyola men's basketball team in Chicago.



For the first time in 33 years, the Loyola-Chicago men's college basketball team made it into the NCAA tournament. They then surprised all the experts by making it to the round of the final eight out of 66 teams. The article was giving credit to Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt as part of the reason for that ascendancy. Her life really is a witness to her faith and its effect on others. In fact, now her influence has gone global. It is called "the Sister Jean effect" (Ted Gregory, "I just go with the flow, *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 2018, p. 4).

Sister Jean once played basketball herself and was a coach in basketball. Now at 98 here's how one [news outlet](#) described her role with the team: "She asks for God's protection for the players. She asks for the referees to call fouls 'justly.' She asks that the team execute the plays the way they were intended. The prayers are anything but bipartisan. 'I ask God to be especially good to Loyola so that, at the end of the game, the scoreboard indicates a big 'W' for us,' she said."

After each game, she sends notes of encouragement to the head coach and each player, always adding a personalized message congratulating a player for his performance or encouraging the downtrodden. Donte Ingram, a Loyola senior said, "There's been days throughout my last four years when I had a bad game, a down game. We might have won. We might have lost. But at the end of the message, she always found a way to make me feel better." After breaking her hip mid-way through the season, restricted to a wheelchair, Sister Jean even made her way to St. Louis to watch—and pray—as Loyola won the conference tournament title. Then she showed up for every game of the NCAA tournament. "I know she's going to be there with us in prayer and cheering us on," Ingram said. "And that means a lot to us." Adapted from Jeff Arnold, "The Nun in Loyola-Chicago's Huddle Has a Few Things to Say," *The New York Times* (3-14-18) "Now, back in her office on the first floor of the Damen Student Center,...Sister Jean keeps her door open. When passers by recognize who she is, they pause, holding their phones, debating whether to interrupt. 'When I see them, you know what I say? I say, Come on in. You wanna take a selfie?' she said. ("I just go with the flow, Ted Gregory, *Chicago Tribune*, Sat. May 26, 2018, Front Page.) She is an optimistic, fun-loving person whose attitude to others, cited in the front page article, is amazingly upbeat, kind and gracious. Her goal to make people happy seems to be realized in each of her connections with others.

She is a winsome witness for the Lord!

Paul tells the Colossians that their witness as believers in Jesus Christ has also been winsome and has spread throughout their known world. Col. 1:6. That's powerful stuff. So for the rest of this year, we are going to learn from them and this letter Paul wrote to them. Remarkably, there are many parallels with them and our time in history, and direct applications for the principles Paul reinforced in their lives that need reinforcing in ours.

It's been said: "Faith, hope and love is the apostolic shorthand for those who have their act together as Christians." That is what Paul heard about the Colossians, that is what people say about Sister Jean and that is what we want to be our witness as a church around the world.

The Colossians apparently shone for Christ in their world. That type of global witness is why we sang the 3 songs in opening worship: "this little light of mine," Shine Jesus Shine (through us!), and Shine. Last night I was lying in bed by the window and looked up and saw myriads of stars in the sky.

Thinking about that song of shining as the stars of the universe, I thought: “What do the stars do?” They proclaim God’s creative wonder. The Bible says He even calls all the stars by name! So, they reveal the character of God. They are also used for navigation to help people and ships chart their course. Put that together with the words to the song:

“Lord, we have seen the rising sun awakening the early dawn
And we’re rising up to give you praise.
Lord, we have seen the sun and moon and how they shine for you
So we rise up with a song and we rise up with a cry and we’re giving you our lives.

Refrain: We will shine like stars in the universe
Holding out your truth in the darkest place
We’ll be living for your glory, Jesus, we’ll be living for your glory.

We’ll burn so bright with your Power O Lord
And declare Your light to this broken world
We’ll be living for your glory

Like the sun so radiantly sending light for all to see
Let your holy church arise, exploding into life like a supernova’s light
Set your church on fire’

Refrain. (“Shine” by Matt Redman)

When Jesus told the disciples they were to be the light of the world, this is the image He had in mind. Not a flickering light we put under a chair to keep it secret. No, the radiant light for all to see, burning with the brightness of God’s power and holding out God’s truth, unashamedly, in the darkest place.

The Colossians held out God’s truth in the midst of a pluralistic, secular culture, like ours today. It was costly for them to shine for Christ in that environment. But they did it through their actions and love for each other and this gave Paul praise. They were living for God’s glory.

But that kind of global witness is not easy. That’s why Redman’s song ends “let your holy church arise...set your church on fire, So we live for God’s glory.”

That’s the big picture of their witness. With that background today I want to pick up 4 words that are highlighted in Paul’s thanksgiving for them in col.1:1-8: their faith, their love for others, their hope in heaven and their belief in the word of truth. Their faith was certainly not just a doctrine but lived out practically through their love for all the saints. It was anchored in their hope in heaven. And each aspect of this faith was “growing” for all the world to witness. A growing faith. A growing ability to express that faith in practical deeds of love towards others and a growing confidence in the truth of God’s word. It’s this latter issue I want us to think about today.

In David’s Garland’s commentary exposition of this early section of Colossians 1 (in the NIV Application Commentary, Colossians) he deals extensively with the area of “growing confidence in the truth of God’s word.” He says: “Christians used to believe that truth did not shift like a kaleidoscope, but pragmatic relativism increasingly rules in our culture today and even has infected many believers’ perceptions of things. This relativism assumes that an idea cannot be inherently true, but it is good if that works for now. So fewer Christians today take for granted that Christianity provides the standard of truth and morality by which all life and all other religions can be assessed... Most generally adhere to the principle that whatever works for me or for you must be true... People do not approach truth objectively but want to know what it can do for them and how it can do it more efficiently. There is a

global consumerist mentality which allows each person to choose his or her particular brand of truth” (David E. Garland, *NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, 1998, p.53-54)

But the Jews and Christians were different in the Roman empire in biblical times because of their unswerving allegiance to one God. “Their religious “intolerance” led others to label Christians as atheist because they did not believe in the gods, only in one God...[In addition,] their denial of the gods was thought to have serious consequences for the community. Since the gods revered were the ones who preserved the state and order, rejecting them opened the community to divine disfavor and catastrophe... In other words, (Paul lived in an age no less pluralistic than ours and it was no less scandalous for Christians to reject the pervasive idolatry and to claim exclusive truth in a culture that prized tolerance” (Garland, *Ibid*, p.57-58)

But the idea of biblical truth, exclusive absolute truth, is absolutely vital for the Christian faith. “We do not search for truth but start from it. Therefore as Christians we cannot shrink from the challenge to refute the misconception that all truth is relative, the dominant view of secular culture. We need to present a distinctive biblical truth in plausible and persuasive ways. (*Ibid*, p.59)

To make this practical, we have to ask: “How do you embrace God’s truth in a secular culture?” Postmoderns tend to believe that Christians who are confident in God’s truth are arrogant toward others who do not accept that truth. And too many times that is actually true. Remember in my own story as a college person? A Christian worker tried to convince me of the exclusivistic claims of Christianity, the reality of hell, and the truth of the Noah and Jonah stories in the Bible, I found his attitude was very arrogant, very dogmatic, and very repulsive. I almost dismissed Christianity outright. It was only the integrity of the life of the other Christians in that conference who were living a wonderful relationship with God that caused me to be open to Jesus Christ – not the way the dogmatic fundamentalist framed the Gospel but the way these other men lived it.

When I talked to Evan (our millennial staff worker at New Hope) about this, he said he believes people outside of Christ know that their philosophy of life is not totally satisfactory. For some at least there is an openness to other religious. But the best way to convince them of the truth in Jesus is through a life of integrity where words and lifestyle match. As D.L. Moody said: “the Bible must be encased in shoe leather; we must live out the faith we say we believe”.

And that’s exactly what was happening, apparently, in the church at Colossae. Their witness was spreading in their known world because their actions matched the words. And their words were words of grace from the gospel of truth (Col 1:5-6).

They were, however, also known by their love. Notice that the word love is repeated twice in this section – Paul commended their “faith, love, and hope” (v. 5) and “their love in the Spirit” (v.8). Our words of truth will be heard when there is evidence of God’s love in our midst. As Jesus said: “*Love one another as I have loved you....By this all people will know that you are my disciples*” (Jn.13:34-35).

I think this means practically that we need to seek out ways to show God’s love to others. We need to get dressed each morning by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ *in his character of love, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness*. (Col.3:12) When we do that, the world notices. Here’s one example:

On July 12, 1986, Steven McDonald, a twenty-nine-year-old police officer on patrol in Central Park, stopped to question three teenagers about a bicycle theft. The oldest, a fifteen-year-old, took out a gun and shot McDonald in the head, neck, and arm. McDonald was rushed to a hospital, where surgeons told his wife that he would be paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life. McDonald spent the next eighteen months in the hospital.

A few years later, McDonald made headlines again, this time because he publically forgave his shooter. Before his death in January 2017, McDonald explained why he forgave his shooter: ‘Looking back, pondering on my life since that time, it's clear to me that God was in charge. All he wanted was the opportunity to use me. He just needed my yes, and that was made possible by prayer. It's that simple, really. Through the family and friends that God put in my life, and their prayers, God spoke to me and said, "Will you love this boy who shot you?" And the best way that I could love him was to forgive him. Left to my own abilities, I don't think I would have done it. ... And I know that I would have died a long time ago had I not listened to God, said yes to God, followed the example of his Son Jesus and loved and forgiven.’ *Sam Hine, "God's Cop," The Plough (April 2017).*

I hope, beloved, that our love for each other in this family of faith at New Hope will be a positive witness around the world as our members who have lived among us return to their home countries. I pray we will be a church that lives out the power of God and shines the word of truth as God's light into the world's very dark places.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 6/3/18

If love is what gives our witness integrity, I believe it is the overflow of our experience of God's love individually and corporately that will overflow to others so they can see God in us. So let's sing:

Song: I Could Sing of Your Love Forever

“Over the mountains and the sea

Your river runs with love for me

And I will open up my heart

And let the healer set me free

I'm happy to be in the truth

And I will daily lift my hands

For I will always sing

Of when your love came down

Refrain: I could sing of your love forever

I could sing of your love forever

I could sing of your love forever”

Repeat refrain.

(Words and Music by Martin Smith)

Amen.