

**June 5, 2016
Colossians 1:24-29
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“Hope of Glory”

Good morning! I hope you will take time after the service today to thank the folks in the choir, and especially Marilee our accompanist and Craig on the bass, for their commitment and musicianship throughout this choir season. This is the last Sunday we’ll sing for a while as a choir. I confess that I chose this text from Colossians for the sermon today, because it’s the text that the anthem is based on. I was delighted to discover how congruent it is with other themes we’ve been exploring together over the past few weeks. This long season of the church year that falls under the general heading of Pentecost goes from Pentecost Sunday until the beginning of Advent. That’s a long stretch of time. It always includes the summer months of June, July and August. Whatever those months mean for you-- family reunions, travel softball, mowing and gardening, summer vacations, Annual Conference -- in the church this is a time to visit and re-visit our mission and vision. Or more accurately, God’s mission and vision, and how we are called to embody that in the world.

Before we tackle Colossians, I’d like to remind you of Creekside’s mission and vision statements. We don’t try to keep these things a secret: they’re on the website and in the Gathering Area and printed on our directories and referenced in meetings. But I know that sometimes when we’re exposed to something all the time it becomes so familiar that we can forget the meaning behind it. Creekside’s mission statement is: Because we are God’s beloved in Christ, united in the Spirit we SEEK God’s love in our lives; CELEBRATE God’s love in vital worship; SHARE God’s love through acceptance, service, and witness. I hope some of that sounds at least vaguely familiar to most of you.

Creekside's vision is this: Like a tree that draws life from the river of God's love, we are a Church of the Brethren congregation Rooted in God, Growing in Jesus, and Bearing Fruit in the Spirit. That's the abbreviated version of our vision. Where I think these connect with Colossians is the ideas of wisdom, growth, and maturity.

Now, one might assume from looking around this congregation that we have a lock on maturity. I'm not going to spend a lot of time making that point, except to say that while wisdom, growth, and maturity are certainly related, there is no guarantee that if you have one, you automatically have both of the others. They don't have to happen in a certain order, but I think our mission and vision statements make sense: seeking God is the beginning of wisdom; wisdom is rooted in God. Colossians says, "It is he [that is, Jesus Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom." (1:28a) It's possible to proceed with almost any endeavor without wisdom -- it happens all the time. The internet is full of videos of plans which end badly. I'm going to show you a very short clip which many of you may have seen. In order to protect human identities, this one features an animal -- a favorite animal of mine. It illustrates that looking wise is not the same as actual wisdom.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Awf45u6zrP0>

Plans go better if we begin with wisdom. That's why mission and vision begin with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The writer of Colossians affirms that God's work is in the word of God and in Christ's body, the church.

Wisdom is not an end in itself; we are called to be wise for a purpose. That purpose is so that we can grow. This applies to the church, the body of Christ, but it also applies to each of us, as we seek to embody Christ in the world. If we ever get to the place, as individuals or as a congregation, where we become so accustomed to who we are that we decide we can't be improved upon and don't need to change -- or that it's everyone else's job to change so that we don't have to -- we have lost our way. We may be good people, we may be a fine congregation, but no one is called to the kingdom of God in order to

stay the same. I believe that God calls us and accepts us and loves us just the way we are, but God wants us to be more than who we are right now. Our vision for the kingdom of God should be greater than what is right here, because growth is God's mission, whether or not we're on board.

Finally, this passage from Colossians talks about maturity, "teaching everyone in all wisdom so that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (Colossians 1:28b) Those last two words are pretty important. Physical maturity, if we're fortunate, will happen whether we do very much or not. Spiritual maturity is not automatic; spiritual maturity is a choice. And in fact, spiritual maturity is pretty hard work. The author says, "For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me." Maturity is a choice which every Christian and every group of Christians must commit to in order to grow. It's a choice which we only have access to through Jesus Christ. The writer of Colossians calls this "the mystery which has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to the saints . . . the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:26, 27b)

And here's what I love about this passage and about God's mission and vision: the hope of glory -- God's wisdom and growth and maturity is not only revealed *to us* because of Jesus Christ, it is revealed *in us* because of Jesus Christ. The more we know Jesus Christ, the more we become like Jesus Christ. That's the mystery this writer is talking about, and it is awesome. I know it's a risky thing for any preacher to say, "This is a mystery. OK, here's what it means." I don't pretend to fully understand how this works, but I believe it is at the heart of God's mission and vision: the more we seek God and know God -- not just in a head way, but also in a heart way -- the more Christ is revealed in us. Other people will actually glimpse Christ when they encounter us. It doesn't end there: we're called to commit to our own growth so that we can preach and teach God's word to other people. If we're mature, then who we are will match what we say. We'll talk the talk *and* walk the walk.

I'm going to interrupt this great rhetoric to tell you a story. I know that it's true, because it happened to me when I was in the middle of reading this scripture and writing about Christ being revealed in each one of us. I got a phone call from someone -- someone not

associated with Creekside -- who has a grievance with me, and whom frankly, I have found to be quite annoying. Her grievance is legitimate however, so I interrupted my writing and went to meet with her and tried to my best not to be irritable, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do right then. I didn't raise my voice or say anything rude, I apologized for causing any inconvenience; but I was short with her. And when I thought she was done -- which was about 10 minutes after I was ready to be done -- she said, "You know, you haven't been very nice to me." And I just about lost it. I'm happy to report that I didn't. Unfortunately, I don't think this was because I was channeling the wisdom and maturity of Christ; it probably had more to do with the fact that I was wearing a shirt which said *Creekside* across the front of it, and I knew there was no way for me to behave badly and remain anonymous. Darn it. I hope if she walked through the doors of the church some Sunday morning, I would find the grace to treat her differently, but the truth of the matter is, I didn't do such a great job on Thursday afternoon.

My point is that sometimes the riches of Christ in us don't get revealed in quite the way we hope. It would be terrific to dazzle the onlookers by whisking away the cloak of our bad behavior with a dramatic flourish to reveal a blaze of glory; but more often Christ is revealed through a series of small choices, practiced over and over again in quiet ways until they become a part of who we are. Not very dramatic, but pretty impressive in its own way: a choice to apologize, a choice to be friendly to a stranger, a choice to let go of the way you hurt me -- even if I think you did it on purpose -- a choice to treat other people with respect, even when they're really annoying, and even when no one will know I'm a pastor at Creekside Church. This is a lot more like polishing the tarnish off a piece of silver than it is like a magician's trick. It's hard work, it takes time, and other people might not notice, even when you've been at it for a while.

If this seems a bit overwhelming, I get it. I believe being a bit overwhelmed is a first step toward wisdom. If you're thinking, "I got this. I've been a great Christian for years; if everybody else were like me, we'd be fine!" you need a reality check. When we start to think we can reveal Christ's glory on our own, or that we have already mastered that, as individuals or a congregation, we're no longer rooted in the wisdom of God. Even the *desire* to preach and teach

and reach others for Christ is a gift which Christ inspires within us. I believe that even when we embody that gift imperfectly, the *desire* to please God is pleasing to God. We serve a God of wisdom beyond what we can understand: a God with high standards and lofty expectations. But we also serve a God of grace and forgiveness; a God of second chances. May we each be inspired to grow in wisdom and maturity as we serve God together. Amen.