

Sermon for ABC July 25, 2021

“Rooted”

Texts: Colossians 2:1-8 and Jeremiah 17:1-8

**Message:** Be rooted in Christ

**Purpose:** Show ABC how being rooted in Christ will help discern truth

### **Introduction**

Good morning... it is a blessing as always to share with you, my church family, from the scriptures... May God bless these words that are prepared, may they go out to ears ready to hear and hearts ready to learn.

Our Scripture for today is Colossians 2:1-8, one of the Apostle Paul's letters. Paul is in prison, writing to people he has never met; to encourage and strengthen them.

*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.*

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*

Paul writes to prepare this young church for some of the challenges to their faith which, like weeds, threaten to choke them out. We know that there were false teachers and heresies aplenty in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. Paul eludes to several here in Colossians:

1.) The first is what will eventually become known as Gnosticism. It disguised itself as Christianity, but was recognized early on as false by early Christians. Among other things, it taught that there were special mysteries that only the initiated or illuminated could know.

In early sections of the letter, Chapters 1 and 2, Paul argues that the only mystery was Christ “*in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*”. And that that mystery is now revealed for all to see. So there is no value in secret initiation, no purpose in seeking understanding outside of Christ.

2.) Another false teaching was a kind of religious pluralism. The surrounding culture worshiped a literal pantheon of gods – the gods of Greek and Roman mythology – as well as local deities. There would have been a temptation to simply add Jesus or the Hebrew God, as one more idol on the shelf, to conform to local customs and not ruffle feathers.

Paul refutes this notion earlier in this letter [Chapter 1:16] “*For by [Jesus] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*” When Paul prays for the Colossians that they have courage and endurance he knows that to acknowledge Christ, and Christ alone, is not the easy path to take.

3.) Finally, it seems the Colossians had to deal with a form of Jewish legalism. Chapter 2 verse 8 leads directly into a long passage about circumcision, dietary laws, and certain religious festivals. This was not a local issue either. One of the major theological debates of the early church concerned whether gentile believers needed to convert to Judaism, and submit to their laws and rituals, in order to be Christians.

Paul’s answer here, as it is in Acts and his other letters, is an emphatic NO. He states this plainly in Colossians 2:16-17: “*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*”

## **Initial Application**

So the first question we ask as we read this passage is: What do these warnings about 1<sup>st</sup> century middle-east heresies mean to us in 21st century America?

*There isn't a church in the town directory called "1<sup>st</sup> Gnostic Assembly of the Initiated".* But there are plenty of cults that use mystery and initiation as calling cards. And there are places that call themselves churches that reek of mysticism.

Also, as pastor Keith pointed out a few months ago, there are blogs and books and websites that claim to be Christian; that appear Christian, but contain perversions or distortions of the truth.

*We don't live in a polytheistic culture in the sense that our neighbors might raise an eyebrow at us if they visit and don't find a household shrine.* But idolatry is alive and well in the form of consumerism, the commercialization of technology that makes big promises it can't keep. And then there are the political and ideological camps that we can join with a simple copy and pasted post or a bumper sticker or a slogan on our clothing. What does our association with these ideologies say about our relationship to Christ?

Have we in our politics been taken "*captive by philosophy and empty deceit?*" Just as it would have been easiest for the Colossians to simply add Jesus to the end of a shelf of local idols, so it is easy for us to simply make religion serve our political ideologies, or to simply jump on the most popular political bandwagons.

And, of course, *there isn't a Jewish legalistic movement in Ashland.* I can't remember the last time I got into a debate with someone on Facebook about circumcision, or whether or not I was going to celebrate the new moon festival. Those debates and false teachings belong to the past, *yet, our culture remains saturated with debates about human rules; about how we are supposed to live, and about how we should compel others in our community to live.*

As Christians, we need to approach this issue with humility. The temptation to fall into patterns of legalism is not far removed from this community or this denomination. I work with people in my generation who were driven away from the church because of legalistic attitudes towards dress. And like prohibition in the 1920s and the anti LGBT

movements of the 1980s, attempts to enforce a culture of Christian morality through legal mandate tend to backfire. There are rabbit trails we could follow here, but not today.

I say all of this, as Paul said to the Colossians, “*in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments*” or, “*so that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit*”.

So, in a world conflicting ideologies, where truth seems relative, where it is hard to trust information, what are we to do? How are we to know what is good, and right and pure and true? Or more simply, **how do we avoid being drawn in to false teaching?**

It is here that God’s word to us, spoken through Paul, shines as a beacon in the dense fog of night.

Return again to Verse 6 and 7: *Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*

These 2 verses are the key to this passage – and, arguably, the whole letter. The “therefore” means that this is the summation of everything leading up to it. And these verses come right before the more detailed teaching part of the letter. This is Paul’s thesis: that we will avoid false teaching by being rooted and built up in Jesus.

So let us unpack these two verses

**“As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him”**

None of this is relevant to us if we have not first received Jesus as Lord. The first step is putting Jesus in the driver’s seat of our lives, surrendering to him, making him boss instead of ourselves. This is the moment where we say to God, OK, your will be done. If anyone is here today who has not taken that step, then to you I say it is the most important decision you will ever make. Either we say to God in the end “your will be done” or God will say to us “Fine, have it your way.”

But that is not the end of it, Paul says as you received Jesus as Lord “so walk in him.” In the beginning, when God created the world, he placed humans in the garden, and it says he would come and walk with his creation, with Adam and Eve, in the cool of the morning [Gen 3:8]. That is how we humans were created to be in relationship with God – to walk with him. That was lost, but the promise of the gospel is that we can walk with God again. We walk with God in and through Jesus.

Paul is clear to stress our salvation is through faith in Christ – in receiving him as Lord – and not through works – thus his rejection of legalism – but Paul teaches that to be in Christ is to walk with him. Consider a three legged race. Both team members need to be going the same direction and they need to be in step or else they fall over. So we need to walk in step with the spirit. As Joel preached last week – this is a deep lifelong journey. All Christians must commit daily to walking in step with the spirit.

The next line builds on this idea:

**“Rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught”**

English translations do not always make this obvious, but this is a parallel idea to “receive, and then walk”

The verb tense in *rooted* emphasizes something that happened once – such as baptism, or the initial acceptance of Christ. Grammatically, this is a *present state as a result of past action*. We are saved once and for all. But for the building metaphor Paul uses a different verb tense that indicates continuous action. Building up our lives in Christ and establishing our faith is an ongoing process that is only possible because we are first rooted. Receive then walk, be rooted, then build.

Paul uses mixed metaphors (Like walking, rooted and building) to help us understand better what he is trying to say. We humans struggle to understand the language of heaven, we have to make due to comparing the things of God to what we can understand. But no metaphor is perfect.

When Kaitlyn and I visited Hocking Hills recently, I was amazed at how a tree would spread its roots along the rock on the sides of cliffs, how it attached and gripped the rocks on cliff faces. It was a good image of steadfastness in a harsh environment – not unlike the tree in Jeremiah 29 that we heard earlier. Likewise we should grow our roots deep into the word of God, the church and prayer to sustain us in times of trouble.

But roots also sometimes fail. On our walk, one massive tree had fallen across the path: the roots pulled up out of the ground, the trunk splintered. As we got closer we realized the base of the trunk was rotten, so the roots had nothing to support. Likewise we Christians, though rooted in the Church and the Bible and in Christian community, are not immune to rot or corruption. You need not look far to see giants of the forest, as it were, who were toppled by immorality, corruption and decay.

To be rooted is not always sufficient. So Paul adds “built up and established in the faith”. You see, Christ is not finished with us: he wants to improve us, to make us more like him. He accepts us how we are, but he never promised to leave us that way.

C.S. Lewis says (as I paraphrase) that when we invite Jesus into our heart – as if into our home – that he starts rearranging the furniture, painting the bathroom, even knocking down walls and adding on. He is not just a guest in our hearts; he intends to live there, and he is building himself a palace.

Our lives are like a home improvement project of epic proportions, and he never misses a single detail. This is why humility is the best approach to discussions of morality. None of us are finished yet.

Which is why Paul concludes this thought with: **Abounding in thanksgiving**

At first glance, this line doesn't seem to fit. Paul says we need to receive Jesus as Lord – a one-time decision that changes everything. He parallels that with the image of being rooted – again the implication is a once and for all event that attaches us to Christ. Paul says we are to walk in him – to become in step with him – an ongoing journey that brings us deeper and closer to our creator. He parallels that idea with the metaphor of being built and established – as if we were a constant home improvement project in process.

To conclude these parallel ideas we might have expected Paul to say we should be abounding in steadfastness – because this is a lifelong journey, or abounding in patience – because we are certain to need it. He could have said we should be abounding in mercy: for ourselves when we take a step backwards or our fellow pilgrims when they fail to live up to their commitments. But Paul doesn't say abounding in mercy, or patience or steadfastness, or love; he says abounding in thankfulness.

You see, when we first attempt to let Jesus shape us to *his* purpose instead of our own, we quickly recognize how big of a task it is going to be. The house we bought as a fixer-upper is way worse than we imagined. It doesn't just need paint, it needs gutted. We learn quickly that the task ahead is too big for us. We recognize that we cannot discern everything on our own. We cannot build ourselves up as is necessary to navigate the pitfalls of false teaching.

Instead, our lives are to be characterized by gratitude to God who in his mercy guides and directs us. As we learned in VBS, God has been with us through it all – all the trials and strife, he has done it before and he will do it again, God is faithful, he is the cornerstone on which we can build our lives. He is the anchor to hold us in the fiercest storm. We abound in thankfulness because of what Christ has done and is doing in our lives – especially because we know we can't do it on our own.

## **Conclusion**

So, as we go this week, may it be another step in the journey, may Jesus this week continue to establish himself in you. This is the ultimate purpose of Christianity – but by striving for this – by being rooted in Christ and his word you will find that the distractions of false teaching are easier to identify.

As it is written in Psalm 1:

Blessed is the one

    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,

nor stands in the way of sinners,

    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

but their delight is in the law of the Lord,

    and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.

Be rooted in Christ, build your lives on him. In doing this we will learn to discern what is good and true in an instant, almost without thinking about it. That's what it means to walk with the Spirit. Be rooted in Christ. Praise be to God!

### **Benediction**

Paul wrote to encourage and strengthen. And that is what that song does for us. Go in the strength of Christ. Be rooted and built up in him. Amen