



Central Peninsula Church

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Colossians 1:21-23

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How To Make Friends With God

SERIES: Colossians: Complete in Christ

I recently heard a true story about a miraculous reunion. A brand new pastor was assigned to his first ministry in suburban Brooklyn. It would be a challenge in that he was called to reopen a church previously shut down. He and his wife arrived in early October, excited about the opportunities for ministry. The first thing they discovered was that the building was in need of a lot of work. They set a goal to get it all fixed up in time for their first service on Christmas Eve. They went to work, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting. Finally, on Dec. 18, they finished. But on Dec. 19 a terrible rainstorm hit and lasted for two days. On the 21st the pastor went over to the church and his heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked and caused a huge area of plaster to fall off the front wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit. He cleaned up the mess and decided he would have to cancel the Christmas Eve service. He headed home and on the way he noticed that a local business was having a flea market for charity, so he stopped in. One of the items he found there was a beautiful, handmade,

a cross right in the center. It was just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall and so he bought it and headed back to the church.

By this time it had started to snow. As he walked back to the church, he saw an older woman running in the opposite direction trying to catch a bus. She missed it, so the pastor invited her to wait in his church for 45 minutes until the next bus came. She sat in the pew and watched as he got his ladder and began to hang the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. He was delighted that it covered up the entire hole. Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle, her face as white as a sheet. "Pastor," she said, "Where did you get that tablecloth?" The pastor explained and then the woman asked him to check the lower right hand corner to see if the initials EBG were there. Much to his surprise, they were. These were her initials, she told him, and she'd made the tablecloth 35 years earlier in Austria. She explained that when the Nazis came she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week, but she was captured, sent to prison, and never saw him again.

The pastor was amazed and of course wanted to give her the tablecloth, but she wanted him to keep it for the church. He insisted on driving her home; it was the least he could do. She lived on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for a housecleaning job. He drove her home and said goodbye.

A couple of days went by and on Christmas Eve the church was almost full and had a wonderful service. At the end of the service, as people were filing out, an older man who the pastor recognized from the neighborhood sat in his pew staring straight ahead. The pastor asked him what he was doing and the man asked him where he got that tablecloth hanging on the wall because it was identical to one his wife made years ago when they lived in Austria. How could two tablecloths be so alike, he wondered? He told the pastor how the Nazis had come, made his wife flee for safety, and how he was supposed to follow her but couldn't because he was arrested and put in prison. He hadn't seen his wife for 35 years.

The pastor asked him if he wouldn't mind going for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island to the same house he had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb three flights of stairs, knocked on the door and watched the greatest Christmas reunion ever!

Believe it or not, that's a true story; it's a true story about a truly miraculous reunion. This morning I want to talk to you about an even more miraculous reunion. It's more miraculous because it's not about how two long lost lovers reunited, but it's about how bitter enemies got together and became the best of friends, and how that friendship was maintained.

I'm talking, of course, about you and me and how we have been brought together with God through something even more amazing than a thirty-five-year-old tablecloth used to cover up a hole in the middle of a wall.

In Colossians 1:21-23 the apostle Paul describes this miraculous and amazing story. He wants us to know how this reconciliation took place and how to maintain the new friendship that has been established. He already told the Colossians that reconciliation has taken place on a cosmic level. In v. 20 he said through Christ God has **"reconciled all things to himself - whether things on earth or things in heaven."** We read that and we think that's good to know, but where do I fit in? So in the next few verses Paul tells our story and he does so in four parts, or four chapters.

I. Our Previous State (v. 21)

Chapter one of this story describes our previous state,

“And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,”

You can see that this story begins on a sour note. He says we were “alienated” from God. This word means in essence that we didn’t belong. When it came to God, we didn’t belong; we were isolated from him. Paul uses a verb tense that is very strong and implies a settled and continuous state. It wasn’t just a little spat between us and God; it was like a thirty-five year separation marked by hostility. That’s what he says. Not only were we alienated but we were antagonistic. We were “hostile (enemies) in mind, engaged in evil deeds.” Alienation led to hostility and hostility to evil deeds.

Last May, Lynn and I had the opportunity to go to Russia. While we were there, we met a wonderful believer. She was close to us in age so we got to talking to her about what it was like to grow up during the Cold War between our two countries. To say the least these two countries were alienated. Of course, she had been indoctrinated in Communism. She was convinced that Americans were evil and hated her people and would go to any lengths to destroy them. She became hostile towards Americans and acted out that hostility by becoming a teacher of Communism. We told her we had basically felt the same thing about them! What was so funny was that here we were talking and we realized that we were really no different from one another!

In a strange way, alienation creates hostility, and hostility creates evil behavior, and evil behavior creates more hostility and deeper alienation. That’s what we have going on in the Middle East right now. Think of how evil deeds have intensified hostility and deepened alienation. This is how we were towards God. Not one of us can say that in our natural selves we just always loved God. It was more like a Cold War. Each of us were born alienated from him, and our alienation became hostility and evil deeds, and our evil deeds deepened our alienation. We don’t like to hear that.

George Whitefield was a great preacher of the 18th century. Even members of high society came to hear him. A Christian woman, Lady Huntingdon, invited her friend, the Duchess of Buckingham, to hear Whitefield preach. The Duchess had heard about Whitefield and here is how she responded to Lady Buckingham: “It is a monstrous thing to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.”

Do you know what the Greek word is for that? “Baloney!” What we call an accident, God calls an abomination. What we call a blunder, God calls blindness. What we call a defect, God call a disease. What we call it infirmity, God calls iniquity. What we call liberty, God calls slavery. What we call weakness, God calls willfulness. Like it or not, this is God’s

analysis of where we were at: alienated and antagonistic. That’s chapter one of our story.

II. Our Present Condition (v. 22a)

Chapter two is much more positive. Paul defines our present condition. Look at v. 22,

“yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death,”

Notice how he says “now.” **“Formerly we were alienated...now he has reconciled us.”** When the NT writers describe what God has done for us in Christ it uses various words. Sometimes it uses the word from the marketplace - redemption - to emphasize how he purchased us from slavery. Sometimes it uses a word from the courtroom - justification - to emphasize that our guilt has been removed and we have been acquitted of all wrongdoing. But sometimes it emphasizes the relational aspects of our salvation, and when it does that it uses the word reconciliation. Reconciliation is about how two parties who were estranged become friends. That’s why we like to say authentic Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a relationship. Paul says this is what has happened to us: our relationship with God has been restored.

Notice who did it. It says “He has reconciled you.” It’s not a matter of meeting God half way. That’s how we do it with others, but that’s not how it works with us and God. He does 100% of the work. That’s why Paul says he reconciled you “in his fleshly body through death.” Someone always has to do the dirty work in reconciliation. Christ did the dirty work. He did it in his physical body. The Gnostic false teachers said Jesus couldn’t really dirty himself with human flesh and die like everybody else. But that’s exactly what he did. As a matter of fact Paul uses a word here for “fleshly body” (sarx) that often has to do with sin. Scripture says **“He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf”** (2 Cor. 5:21). It’s that which brought us together with God.

Years ago a husband and a wife became estranged from one another after the death of their only son and decided to separate. They moved away and lived in different parts of the country. The husband had to return to the city where his wife still lived on a matter of business and he decided to go out to the cemetery and visit the grave of their son. He was standing over the grave thinking about his son when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned and looked and it was his estranged wife. His initial impulse was to walk away. But something held him there and as she walked up they looked down at the grave together. Soon they had clasped hands. From that day forward they were reconciled. They were reconciled through death!

Our relationship with God was healed through the death of his only Son on the cross. Not because of some shared sentimentality, but because in his death he bore the separation from God that sin brings. That’s why on the cross he cried out, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” His Father had to forsake him to accept us. That’s chapter two - our present condition.

III. Our Future Destiny (v. 22b)

Chapter three of this story gets even better. It describes our future destiny. Look at the latter half of v. 22,

“in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-”

In many ways, this describes what we are now because of Christ, but the emphasis is on that future day when we'll be presented to him. We'll be presented to him as holy. What do we mean when we say something is holy? We talk about the “Holy Bible.” What makes it holy? We talk about the “Holy Land” of Jerusalem. We talk about the “Holy City” of Jerusalem. What makes those things holy? There is one quality they all have in common: they all belong to God. The Bible is God's book; Israel is God's land; Jerusalem is God's city. We who didn't belong will be presented to God as Holy, as belonging to him.

Not only that, but we will be presented to him as blameless. The word really means to be without blemish. The image comes from the OT where sacrifices were made for sin. If a person sinned he would have to offer a sacrifice. He would have to find an unblemished lamb, bring it before God, lay his hands on it, confess his sin and then slit its throat. But it wouldn't be acceptable as an offering for sin unless it was unblemished. Paul is saying that we will be a sacrifice to God that is without blemish.

Finally he says we will be “beyond reproach.” Now Paul goes into the courtroom. The idea is that no charge can be made against us. Our guilt will be gone and we will stand before God completely righteous. Think about that. The amazing thing to me is that we will still be ourselves, but we will be perfect. We will recognize each other. We will say, “Oh that's Bob! I can always tell by the way Bob walks.” But in another sense we will be different. We'll see Bob and say, “It's you, but you're different. You used to scare me with that bad temper and all. What happened?” We'll see someone else and say, “Hey, Julie, it's you. You have that same warm smile. But you're different. It used to be hard to be around you because you were always so depressed. You're not like that anymore.” It will be you, it will be me, our personalities will not be obliterated, but they will be transformed.

We say, how can that be? How could we be presented to him holy and without blemish and beyond reproach? Jill Briscoe tells the story of meeting a woman at a conference who had been abused by her father as a child. She grew up, came to Christ, overcame the emotional damage he had done to her, and eventually married. Years later, after her children were grown she got a letter from her father telling her he had become a Christian and asking for her forgiveness. Of course, all kinds of feelings came to the surface for her. Most of all she felt, “It isn't fair! He should be made to pay for what

he did to me.” Then she had a dream. She saw her father standing on an empty stage. Above him were the hands of God holding a white robe of righteousness. As the robe began to descend towards her father, she woke up and began to cry out, “No! It isn't fair! What about me?” She could only rejoice, as God was pleading with her to do, when she realized that robe was familiar. Her father was about to put on the same robe she had been wearing for some time. They were both the same in God's sight. God had given his Son to purchase both of their robes. When she realized that, she began to rejoice for her father.

It is only because we are given the white robe of righteousness that we can be presented to God as holy, without blemish, free from accusation. All this God has done for us. The question is, what's our part in this? Do we do nothing? Is there anything left for us to do?

IV. Our Current Work (v. 23)

The fourth chapter tells about our current work. Look at v. 23,

“if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.”

Our future presentation to God as holy is conditional upon our continuing in the faith. It's like he's saying, “The hope holds good if we hold onto it.”

Does this mean we can lose our salvation? Does this mean if I falter in my faith I will lose the white robe? Never! That's not what he says. Certainly, we know that apart from faith in Christ we have no hope of heaven. We have to accept the gift he offers us. But here he also says the promise is only good to those who continue on in that faith. What does that mean?

Think of it this way. What if you were flying to Atlanta and I said to you, “If you don't get on the plane you won't get to Atlanta.” That would be a true statement. But this doesn't say who buys the ticket, or who carries you on the plane, or who flies it to Atlanta. You see, it's true we must continue on in faith, but who is the One who gives us faith, and who is the One who carries us, and who is the One who promises to take us to our final destination? You see, from God's point of view, our continuing on in the faith is guaranteed, but from our point of view, we have to continue to be “firmly established and steadfast, not moved away from the hope of the gospel.”

Last weekend our worship pastor Mark Dobrin ran a marathon. He came into the office on Tuesday

with a big smile on his face and a big medal in his hand. He said, "I did it!" Well, guess what? He never could have said that and he never would have received that medal if he didn't run 26 miles, 385 yards. He had to run it all. Twenty-five miles wouldn't have been enough. He had to run through the finish line to get the prize. Paul says in the race of faith you have to run through the finish line to get the prize. It's not enough to make a decision, raise your hand at a meeting, get your fire insurance, and then forget about it. You have to continue on. The good news is that God has pledged to carry you across the finish line if he has to. But we run and at times it feels like it's taking everything we have out of us, but we run with confidence that God will see us through to the end.

Two new biographies on ex-Beatle John Lennon claim he experienced a brief period as a Christian. While living as a recluse in New York, he began watching evangelists such as Billy Graham on TV. At some point, most likely on Palm Sunday of 1977, he declared he had been saved after being moved to tears by a broadcast on Jesus shown on CBN. After that, his everyday conversation was peppered with, "Praise the Lord," and "Thank you Jesus!" In the following weeks he attended church and took his son to a Christian theater performance. He even called the 700 Club helpline to request prayer for his health and his troubled marriage. He prayed for forgiveness when he stepped on insects or snapped at the maid. He even wrote a song about it, known only to Beatles' bootleggers. The man who had once written, "Imagine there's no heaven / It's easy if you try," wrote a song called "You Saved My Soul."

But his wife, Yoko Ono, wasn't happy. Her first husband had become a Christian, too. She feared his new faith would clash with her own involvement in the occult and loosen her hold on him. In the end, she won. In his final years, Lennon lived a life dictated by astrologers, clairvoyants, psychics, and tarot-card readers. I don't know where John Lennon is today, but it doesn't appear he crossed the finish line of faith.

CONCLUSION

Contrast John Lennon with Simon Peter. At the end of John 6, Jesus told his disciples that he was the bread of life who came down from heaven. He said you have to eat this bread, which is my body, and drink my blood if you want to know eternal life. As a result of this teaching, John says, "many of his disciples withdrew and were not walking with him any more." They didn't cross the finish line. So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to join them?" Peter said, "Lord, who would we go to? You have the words of eternal life." You see, no one else can reconcile us to God for all eternity but Jesus. His body is that tablecloth that covers up the hole in our lives and brings us back to God. And this is why we come to the communion table. Jesus told us to do this over and over again. Why? Because as we eat the bread and drink the cup we are strengthened to go one more mile towards the finish line.

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