

**Proper 12C 2019 Sermon**  
***Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)***

*As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives 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 through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.*

*[Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.]*

St. Paul writes a letter to the Colossians because he has received disturbing news that some of the members of the Church in Colossae (a church which Paul had established) are being led astray by a different “philosophy.” In the words of the *Common English Bible* translation, Paul exhorts the Colossians: “See to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception which conform to *human* traditions and the way the *world* thinks and acts rather than Christ.” (v. 8, CEB) Paul gives a similar exhortation some verses later, warning against those who are “puffed up without cause by a **human** way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body... grows with a growth that is from God.” (vss. 18-19, NRSV)

What is the situation in the Colossian church that so upsets Paul? Biblical scholars believe that there was a group of people in the city of Colossae (some scholars simply call them “Paul’s opponents”) who were teaching a philosophy that said it was OK for Christians to keep much of their Christian beliefs, and to

call themselves followers of Christ, while at the same time incorporating their Christian beliefs into a larger philosophical system in which Christ played a *part*, but not a principal part.

And, my fellow Christians, do we not still see that in our world today? There seems to be a natural human tendency for us to be drawn to the **world** and *its* philosophies – particularly in our day when we are **ceaselessly** *bombarded* by those philosophies, 24/7, on television or social media. As Paul’s opponents had convinced the Christians in Colossae that their Christian beliefs didn’t conflict with the worldly philosophy which the opponents were preaching, so **we** are often led to believe that we can keep our Christian faith while at the same time allowing the world and *its* philosophies (which often contradict the Gospel) to dominate our thinking and mindset, and captivate our emotions – especially our anger (see verse 8). But St. Paul *strongly* reminds the Christians in Colossae (and by extension, Christians today) that we have our “**fullness** in [Christ], who is the head of *every* ruler and authority” (v. 10).

My friends, we need to listen to Paul and beware that we are not taken “captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition... and not according to Christ.” We must ever remember that Christ taught us to pray to God, “**Thy** kingdom come,” with its unspoken corollary, “**my** kingdom – and all lesser kingdoms – must go, or at least be subordinate to the kingdom of God.”

And yet, so often, instead of seeking **first** the *kingdom of God* and **his** righteousness, as Jesus taught (Matthew 6:33), we spend far more of our time, effort, and emotional energy on the kingdom of *this* world and whatever this world’s loud voices *tell* us is “righteous” – which is often **not** the righteousness of Christ. We supplant the mind of Christ with lesser, partisan, political, nationalistic, ethnic, and sectarian mindsets – mindsets of this world. Like Paul’s opponents who were teaching that it was OK for the Christians in Colossae to keep their Christian beliefs while subordinating them to a higher “philosophy,” so *we* can be led to think that it is possible to keep *our* Christian beliefs while subordinating them to whatever political, nationalistic, or sectarian philosophy is being promoted and promulgated in our world today.

In fact, **God** is often *co-opted* as a tool for promoting such human, worldly philosophies! A recent law was passed in South Dakota mandating that “In God We Trust” be prominently displayed in every public school building in South Dakota. The stated reason given by the legislature and governor for this law was not to encourage faith in God or a deeper spirituality, but rather to “inspire patriotism.” God is conscripted to promote patriotism. My friends, the words “God” and “country” are not synonyms; in fact, sometimes they are opposed to each other, as the Bible clearly shows (see how often the prophets in the Old Testament proclaim that the nation or the nation’s leader is not following God’s will). Has putting “In God We Trust” on our money and in other public places done anything to cause us to act in a more Christ-like way, to follow Jesus’ clear

teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as our self? To welcome the stranger? Be less materialistic? Treat members of the “other” political party with love, respect, and compassion? Love God’s children who are citizens of *other* nations, or love our enemies, as Christ commands?

So what is it about us that allows us to believe, like the Colossians were led to believe, that we can be good Christians while at the same time being “enslaved by philosophy and foolish deceptions which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ?”

I would like to offer two possible explanations, both taken from articles written 3 years ago, in the months *before* the 2016 presidential election.

In the February, 2016 issue of *Relevant Magazine*, in an article with the long title, “7 Things Christians Need to Remember About Politics: How to be **in** the world, not **of** the world, in a culture of political vitriol,” author Bryan Roberts painted a vivid image of how Christians in political election seasons often behave. Roberts wrote:

“Political discourse is the Las Vegas of Christianity—the environment in which our sin is excused. Hate is winked at, fear is perpetuated and strife is applauded. Go wild, Christ-follower. Your words have no consequences here. Jesus doesn’t live in Vegas.

“Not only are believers excused for their political indiscretions, but they are often applauded for committing them. Slander is explained away as righteous anger; [and] *winning* arguments are esteemed higher than truthful ones...”<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

In June of 2016, theology professor Richard Crane offered another image which I think can help us understand how people can claim they are devout Christians and at the same time be “enslaved by philosophy and foolish deceptions which conform to human traditions and the way the **world** thinks and acts rather than Christ.” Professor Crane wrote: “Perhaps the current political rhetoric can be compared to a skilled magician who performs magic tricks before our eyes by directing our attention to what she or he wants us to see. As Christians, do we, like the biblical prophets, have the responsibility to call attention to what the magician is doing with his or her *other* hand?”<sup>2</sup>

I think the answer is: Yes, we do.<sup>3</sup> For we follow a Lord who said that **he** is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and we must be clear about what that Truth is. In a vivid scene near the end of John’s Gospel, Pontius Pilate, the Roman political authority, asks the prisoner Jesus if he is a king. Jesus replies, “My kingdom is not from this world... For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” And Pilate responds, “What is truth?” (19:33-38)

Pilate's question is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago: What is truth, in a world where blanket statements are made without any substantiating evidence, sometimes even in the face of contradicting evidence? What is truth, in a world where the overwhelming evidence of scientific study is ignored because it would lead us to do something we don't want to do? My friends, I *do* think that, like Jesus, we *followers* of Jesus have been called to testify to the truth. And I think we can *begin* by being truthful with ourselves, asking ourselves questions such as:

Am I seeking first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness in my life? Does Christ favor *my* country or my group over every other nation or group? Do I make excuses for the hurtful words, demonstrable lies, and moral indiscretions of politicians whom I favor, and turn a blind eye to the people that have been harmed? How would Jesus want us to handle the difficult matters which confront our world today: the migrants at our borders, our relationships with other nations, the homeless persons on our streets, our pollution of God's creation? Do I even *care* what Jesus thinks; or do I say to myself, "I know what Jesus said, but this is the **real** world?" Do I claim to be a good Christian, while keeping hidden from others – and even from myself! – the very UN-Christian attitudes in my heart? Do I judge the state of our nation by how the economy is doing rather than by the state of our nation's soul? Do I even *want* to become more Christ-like?

To ask ourselves these questions, my friends, is hard; but it is absolutely necessary if we are to be *true* followers of Christ. To ask ourselves these questions requires an unflinching honesty, humility, and vulnerability, difficult indeed in a charged political climate of attack and defensiveness. Yet vulnerable, humble, and honest we **must** be if we are to "continue to live our lives in Christ," as Paul exhorts us to do at the beginning of today's reading. For that's what we are being called to do – to continue to live **in Christ**, *especially* in the midst of a toxic political climate where it is so easy to be "taken captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, ... and not according to Christ."

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> February 1, 2016. <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/current/politics/7-things-christians-need-remember-about-politics>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/topics/faith-and-politics/faith-and-politics-richard-crane?p=2>

<sup>3</sup> "The biblical tradition reveals that whenever the prophetic gift is lacking in any group or religion, such a group will very soon be self-serving, self-perpetuating, and self-promoting. Without prophetic criticism, all sense of mission and message is lost." -Richard Rohr