

“To the Ends of the Earth”

Colossians 1:15-22

sermon digest

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Today's worship and sermon conclude our series on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. We reflect on the final promise in our covenant: "We will cast our vision to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love, and revelation of God to the whole human family."

I was reading Millard Fuller's book on Habitat for Humanity, *Theology of the Hammer*, when I heard on the news that Paul Newman had died. I turned from the news to the last chapter of Fuller's book "A Theology for the World" that begins, "The actor Paul Newman, who is well-known for his charitable giving to causes he believes in, has long been a faithful contributor to Habitat for Humanity." (p. 121ff.) The story was about a generous gift that Habitat received from Newman's Own, Inc. When asked to provide a list of locations where the money would be used, Fuller identified several communities in the U.S. and added a few developing countries like Mexico and Nicaragua.

Newman then called to discuss the list. The money came from U.S. sales. Why include foreign countries? For a layman with no formal theological training Fuller's answer was profound, "God is not an American citizen. God's love is universal and our expressions of love should be the same. We should put no artificial boundaries on our various expressions of love." Newman agreed and suggested adding a few more foreign countries for balance.

God's love is universal and eternal. It's a big world out there. Who among us has not looked into the sky on a clear night and wondered with the Psalmist, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Jewish religion emerged in the competition of local deities. The power and glory of the surrounding nations always depended on the relative power of their gods. The Jews had a bigger picture of the world and a vastly different picture of God. The God of Creation is not just a local deity consumed with my little world of aches and pains, successes and failures. You are not an island in this universe. You are part of the whole creation: "Each man's death diminishes me,/For I am involved in mankind./Therefore, send not to know/For whom the bell tolls,/ It tolls for thee." (John Donne)

The birth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel involves international visitors from the East. We celebrate the foreign visitors after Christmas. Epiphany speaks to the larger world beyond the immediate conflict with Herod over one born to be "King of the Jews." His kingdom transcends all of the kingdoms of this world. Matthew ends with the Great Commission; a handful of disciples, mostly peasants without political clout or wealth commissioned by Christ to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." What kind of arrogance infected this little group to think that they could change the world?

Paul's letter reminds Colossian Christians that the gospel is "bearing fruit and growing in the whole world." To be more precise, Paul was saying that the gospel was spreading throughout the Roman Empire. The *kosmos* of Paul's day would seem small compared to our concept of the universe; but compared to the mustard seed-beginning, the little band of disciples seemed to have taken the Great Commission to the limit.

Eduard Schweitzer calls Paul's opening doxology in Colossians a "hymn." The hymn transcends the detailed moments in the life of Jesus and the horrible memory of the cross to proclaim the Christ of eternity, "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." The violent Roman culture appears to have rolled over the man Jesus and crushed him, but the last word belongs to the eternal Christ: "He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

In 1961, Meteorologist Edward Lorenze decided to use computer technology to construct a model of patterns to better predict the weather. He found that the problem was too complex. His conclusion is called the "butterfly effect," a butterfly flapping its wings in South America can affect the weather in Central Park." I used to hear my friend Bill Slider on "The Moral Side of the News" say, "You can't do just one thing." Every human action has a larger effect than we can imagine. Have you noticed the side-effects listed for your prescription drugs?

We easily become self-absorbed in our personal needs and crises with little thought for the problems of outsiders or distant others, but we are beginning to recognize the wisdom of Donne's

word, "No man is an island." My life and needs are so intertwined with the rest of the world that I can no longer think of myself as just an individual. Perhaps you noticed that our nation has entered an economic crisis that is being compared to 1929. I heard a European spokesman on the news announce that this was purely a U.S. problem, that European banks were solvent that their mortgages and credit were strong. Within 24 hours world markets joined the U.S. crisis with tight credit and falling values. Again we are reminded that we are in this together. The present challenge is to get the world together in recognition that competition has to take second place to cooperation if we are going to get out of this mess. Long before we were forced to think globally by the economic crisis the Christian gospel was calling us to a world vision.

The church lives in the world, for the world. A symbol of the church in early church history was Noah's Ark, a ship afloat on the sea of the world, there to rescue the perishing. We are accustomed to speaking of the place of worship as a *sanctuary*. I had a friend in seminary, who viewed the formality of high church as the worst evil ever set upon the earth. I referred to the church "sanctuary" in a conversation, and he wanted to know if my church was "for the birds." He actually had the right idea. A sanctuary is a place of refuge, a fortress of protection from the threats and dangers of the outside world. The churches were places of protection from arrest and violence for fugitives during much of Christian history, a practice that has re-emerged during the emigration crisis in the U.S. The early Christian "Desert Fathers" believed that they were called to withdraw from the world to live in total devotion to God. These early monastics chose to live as far away from civilization as possible. We have our modern counterparts in Christian retreat centers where the faithful can withdraw from the daily routines of the secular world to refresh the spirit. The Gospels report that Jesus regularly went aside from his friends to be alone with God.

The need for occasional retreat and spiritual refreshment is real and should not be taken lightly, but be aware that breathing involves both inhaling and exhaling, giving and taking air. You can't have one without the other, and you can't survive on half of the respiratory function. Why, then, should we think that the church should be *only* a taking institution, here to breathe in the Spirit and to live the holy life? Just as God so loved the world that he sent the Son, the same love of God sends us out into the world. We are reminded again of Emil Brunner's maxim: "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning." We are in the same world with the robber barons on Wall Street and with Mother Teresa in Calcutta.

A few years ago Barbara Brown Taylor left the parish ministry to take a position in the religion department of a small school in Georgia. Probably no one would have noticed except for the biographical statement she wrote in a book entitled *Leaving Church*. As rector of the small Grace-Calvary Church in Clarksville, Georgia, Taylor had become one of the most respected preachers in America. She had published several books and was in demand as a speaker to church groups around the nation. She was among the first women to make it in the parish ministry. Unfortunately her celebrity attracted swarms of tourists to the small Georgia town, overwhelmed the limited capacity of the small church building, and created stress both for the pastor and the people. So when she left, it was more than just another career decision on her part. She left in order to recover a measure of peace and meaning to her life. She left with a mixture of grief and love for the preaching life. Typical of Taylor's insight into the ordinary events of life, she wrote an article last year about the necessity of leaving church in order to be church.

In short, the church is not a hiding place from the pain of the world. If we follow Christ, we must follow the *kenosis*, the pouring-out, characteristic of his ministry and described in Philippians 2:5-8. Barbara Brown Taylor concluded: "Leaving church, I believe, is what church is for—leaving on a regular basis, leaving to see what God is up to in the world and joining God there, delivering all the riches of the institution to those who need them most, in full trust that God will never leave the church without all that it needs to live." (*Christian Century*, May 29, 2007, p. 35) In order to be the church, we must leave the safety and sanctity of church to serve in God's wonderful world.

And, we have made a covenant together as church: "We will cast our vision to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love, and revelation of God to the whole human family."
(Grace Covenant)