



Advent 3 – December 13, 2015
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*Joy for Every Longing Heart:
Does the Church Matter?*
Colossians 1:18

Last week Ellis shared some of the drama of their visa issues. Our government put them through the ringer, and you can understand why. The Whites are clearly a security risk! But here's the rest of the story. Ellis was approved for a visa, but his wife was not. So, we've waited for months to find out if we are going to have to ship Rachel back to England. Good news! Last week she got her visa, too. That's a great Christmas present to all of us!

During Advent, we are taking a break from the Story (which will resume January 3) in order to focus on the greatest Christological passage in the Bible. Nowhere else can you find this soaring description of Jesus than in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Jesus speaks to the deep longings of every human heart. "Can we know God?" our longing hearts cry out. "Absolutely," Paul says. "Jesus is the image of the invisible God." "What does the future hold?" our longing hearts cry out. Paul replies, "Not what, but who. Jesus is before all things and in him all things hold together."

This morning, Paul answers a third question that is increasingly prevalent in our society: Does the Church matter? Listen for a word that repeats itself over and over.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The pop star Justin Bieber is well known for his exploration of Christian faith. He was baptized in recent years, his posts include Bible references, but Justin stirred things up recently when he said the following: "...you don't need to go to church to be a Christian. If you go to Taco Bell, that doesn't make you a taco."

Justin is actually saying two things here. The first is, “Going to church does not make you a Christian.” Of course this is true. Christianity is not about attending religious rituals or having your name on church rolls; it is about a personal relationship with Jesus.

But he also makes another claim: “...you don’t need to go to church to be a Christian.” This idea is echoing throughout our culture: Does the Church matter? Maybe you have wondered that. You are here today—perhaps under pressure, perhaps because there was nothing better to do. But the truth is, you view church as the ultimate of optional activities. Let’s see what Paul says.

To start, I wonder did you spot the word that appears so many times? “Things!”

Verse 16: For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created by him and for him.

Verse 17: He is before all things, and in him all things hold together...

Verse 19: ...and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven...”

The word appears nine times in this passage. What is Paul saying? There is not one thing over which Jesus is not supreme! What did Jesus create? All things. What does Jesus sustain? All things. Over what is Jesus Lord? All things. What will Jesus reconcile to himself? All things. No-thing is outside the scope of Jesus’ authority, his power, his control, his redemption. Jesus is Boss. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is God. You will never find a grander statement of the Lordship of Jesus than right here.

So if you’ve just used the phrase “all things” nine times, you’ve pretty much made your point, haven’t you! You don’t need to give examples, do you? And yet, in the middle of that declaration, Paul does give an example of something Jesus is in charge of... the Church. ¹⁸ “And he is the head of the body, the Church...”

Why—after telling us nine times that Jesus is supreme over all things—does Paul specifically mention the church? Doesn’t the church fall into the category of “all things?” What is he getting at? The church really, really, really matters to Jesus—really, really, really, really, really—of all things, the Church particularly matters to Jesus.

But why? First, we need to understand what “church” is... and what it is not. It is not a building. This sanctuary, as beautiful as it is, is not the Church... nor is our denomination the Church. As grateful as we are to be a part of the EPC, it is only part of the Church. Not a building, not a denomination... what then? “Church” is the collection of all people who belong to Jesus. And what is Paul’s metaphor for that collected group of people? The body.

We are so used to saying “the body of Christ,” we forget what a remarkable image it is. Paul doesn’t say that we are all trees in the forest of Christ’s love, or that we are all planets in the universe of Christ’s love. He says we are the Body...part of each other! We are not individual Douglas Firs, stretching up to the sky for a relationship with God. We are not individual planets, spinning away in our own little corner of the God universe. Paul says, we are a body... connected, interrelated, indivisible.

The first time Paul used this metaphor was in I Corinthians 12. He writes that every one of us is an essential and different part of the body. We cannot exist apart from the body, and without us the body is not complete. He even has fun with that silly idea. He says, “The toe can’t just say to the eye, ‘I don’t need you anymore.’ And the ear can’t say to the nose, ‘I’m fine on my own.’ Every part of the body is connected and necessary.

But when Justin Bieber says, “I don’t need the Church,” in essence he is pulling out a cleaver and saying, “I don’t need you or you or you... any of you. I can be a Christian all by myself. I’m fine just like this!”

There is nothing more connected than a body, all of its parts working together. Just so, there is no such thing as an independent Christian. Such a person does not exist. We were saved—not just from hell and not just into heaven someday. Jesus saved us into his church right now— into an intimate web of relationships.

You may not know it, you may not even like it, but Jesus put you together with you, and you with you, and you and you and you. You belong to each other. You need each other. Turn to the person next to you in the pew and say, “You belong to me. I belong to you. We need each other.” The Church matters because Jesus has called us into an essential, life-giving relationship with one another.

What about Jesus’ relationship with the Church? How does Paul describe that? “He is the head of the body, the church.” Paul is speaking of Jesus’ authority. Remember, he is supreme over all things including, and especially, his church. But Paul could have used different language for that. He could have said, “He is the Emperor over the Church.” Everyone who lived under the Romans would have understood that metaphor. But no, he describes Jesus’ authority by saying, “He is the head of the body.” What is the essential reality of a relationship between head and body? Connection!

We’ve been watching a TV series about Mary Queen of Scots. When Queen Elizabeth decided Mary was a threat to her throne, how did she solve that problem? Off with her head! End of threat! The body needs the head to function. How many of you were here back in 2003 when I took my family to Sun Valley and we went ice skating? I fell, hit my head on the ice and nearly died. They airlifted me to a hospital, put me into a coma and pumped me full of steroids to reduce the swelling in my brain. The rest of my body was fine, except for what you see in the picture,

[picture], but as long as my head was malfunctioning the rest of my body was useless. The body needs the head.

But the head also needs the body, doesn't it? And here we delve into the mystery of the incarnation. Does Jesus need His Church? We are quick to say that God doesn't need anything, and that is true. But does God need what he chooses to need? When God the Son became a human being in Bethlehem—when he came to earth to redeem his church and have an intimate relationship with us, when, he chose to attach himself as a head is attached to a body—wasn't he, in a sense, choosing to need us?

And not just for his time on earth... but for all eternity. One of the most amazing things about the incarnation is that it was permanent. Did you know that? Jesus ascended back to heaven in his resurrected human body. We are told that for all eternity, Jesus will bear the scars of his crucifixion. When each of us arrives in heaven, every time we look upon the exalted, scarred body of Christ, we will be reminded of the price he paid to save his Church.

My point is this: In a sense you could say that by connecting himself to us as a head is connected to the body, Jesus was saying, "I choose to need you. I want an intimate relationship with you." So when Justin Bieber says, "I don't need the Church to be a Christian; I can do it by myself." Jesus says, "What are you talking about? I chose to be connected to the Church for eternity. I chose to bind myself to all of you. How can you do otherwise? There is no relationship with me that doesn't include the rest of my Body. That's how much the church matters to me."

In other words, if Jesus desires—dare I say, even needs—an intimate relationship with us, how arrogant would we be to say that we don't need that same relationship with each other?

We are building our church around LifeGroups. For the first time, we have trained leaders waiting to fill new small groups, yet we still have hundreds of you who are saying, "Yeah, I really don't need that. I'm fine on my own... just me and Jesus." And I believe Jesus would say, "Are you crazy? I didn't save you to be by yourself. I saved you for relationship within my Body. If you are not in community, then you will never know what it means to live in real relationship with me."

Why does the Church matter? Because it is in community with each other—as different and crazy and broken as we might be—that Jesus connects with us. There is no such thing as solo Christianity and anyone who thinks so is deluding himself, and it is only a matter of time before he falls and will have no one to pick him up.

If you are indifferent in your commitment to this Body—if you just check off all the spiritual boxes, or if you attend worship only when nothing else more attractive comes along, or if you've never seriously considered the idea that you (not your wife or your husband or the person next to you) need to be in a LifeGroup—then

you do not really understand what it means to be in relationship with Jesus who is the Head of His body and who ministers to us through his body. That's why the church matters.

It also matters because we represent Jesus. Do you want to hear something scary about the incarnation? Since Jesus is still in his earthly body—and that body is in heaven—guess how He is doing His work on earth? Through us! We are now the body of Christ, or to put it differently, we are the continuing incarnation of Jesus on earth. How scary is that?

And if you think I'm making that up, listen to what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: (1:22-23) *"God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."*

Did you hear that? The body is "the fullness of him who fills everything..." Back to our text: ¹⁹...God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus]..." So if God's fullness dwells in Jesus, and Jesus' fullness dwells in the body—God filled Jesus, Jesus filled us—think about that for a moment! That will blow your mind. We and our brothers and sisters at HCC and at St. John's and down the street at Believers and around the world—all of us together represent the fullness of Christ to the world. Not individually—individually we are too broken, too flawed—but together empowered by the Spirit, pooling our gifts and prayers and passions, we are Jesus to the world. We are the continuing incarnation of the Jesus to his world, carrying on what he started at Bethlehem!

Really? That's what God's Word says, and that is another reason the Church matters. On our own, we are too sinful, too limited, too weak, too timid to show Jesus to this world. But when we come together—when we offer our various parts, when you offer your hands and you offer your ears and you offer your mouth and you offer your big toe—when together we become the Body with Christ as our Head, together we can redeem the world. And God knows this world needs redeeming!

Is the Church flawed? Of course it is. But does the Church still matter? Absolutely! It mattered enough to Jesus that he took on human form so that he might join himself to her. It mattered enough to Jesus that he died for her. And it matters enough to Jesus that he delegated his work to us as his continuing incarnation on earth. That's how much the church matters. If you don't care to be really connected to Chapel Hill—or to any of the other great churches in this community, pick one—then you really don't care to be connected to Jesus and what he is doing in his world.

Do you really think you can live that way? You can't.