

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. ⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:3-8)

The Gospel is Bearing Fruit

The other day I went to buy my dad a Father's Day card. As I was walking out to my car, a memory of my childhood hit me. It must have taken place when I was in first or second grade. We were at some big store, and I got separated from my mom and dad. I looked for them but I couldn't find them. So I concluded that they must have gone out to the car. So I did, too. I found the car but they weren't there. So I stood there for a while, not knowing what else to do. Then I saw my dad walking toward me. Of course, he wanted to know why I left the store. When I explained that I came out to the car to look for them he said, "We would never leave without you." Now, he didn't say it in a big dramatic way, like it would be played on TV. He was more surprised that I would even think that they would leave a store without me. But what seemed totally obvious to him, wasn't to me, at least to my six or seven year old brain.

I don't think that's terribly unusual. Even today, my dad and I don't always see things the same way. My children and I don't always see things the same way. If that's true for us human beings, how can we possibly see things the way God does? Our epistle lesson for Father's Day begins with St. Paul thanking "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" – who is also our Father in heaven – for the faith and life of the Christians in the city of Colosse. In this reading, he points out things that are obvious to God the Father but that might be a little harder for us to see. He puts those things together under one single idea: **the gospel is bearing fruit.**

I.

It's bearing fruit among us. Paul said, "**We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints ...**" In some ways, this reminds me of something that happened last week at our district convention. The delegate from the congregation I served before I came here was a young man that I confirmed probably fifteen or sixteen years ago. He has grown into a faithful, Christian young man who is willing to take time off and be a part of our church's work. I couldn't help but thank God to see his faith and his love for the church. But there is difference: we have no record that Paul ever actually visited Colosse. But he had worked nearby and he knew their pastor and at least some of the Christians who were there. So maybe a more appropriate comparison might be when our former pastor visits here. Our older members remember him. But a lot of people here were not members yet when he was pastor here. Still, when he visits, he rejoices to see the faith and the love of God's people here.

Where does that faith and love come from? Paul says that they "**spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.**" Our hope is stored up for us in heaven. What does that mean? Many years ago, when I was in the army stationed in Germany, I bought my mother a set of china. She always says that that china belongs to my daughter. My daughter doesn't possess it yet, but my mother has made her plan clear. In the same way, we don't possess the joys of heaven yet. But God has that joy stored up for us in heaven and he has made clear his plans to give it to us. Unlike my mother, God's plans cannot fail. That china could get lost in a house fire or broken in a fall or taken in a bankruptcy. But nothing can keep God's gift of life from reaching us.

And the gospel tells us that is true. It's the message that you and I are forgiven for all our sins. It's the promise that we will live in God's presence for all eternity. That message gives us faith which clings to that hope that's waiting for us. And that faith trusts in God when life hurts. It clings to Jesus' words that we are forgiven when we feel guilty. It moves us to love each other – in our families and in our community and also, here, in our spiritual family, our church.

That's what our Father sees when he looks at us. Is that what we see? Do you feel like the wonderfully faithful people St. Paul describes here? Or did you feel guilty when I spoke about that young man who was willing to take time off to go to district convention because he loves his Savior's work? Do you feel like you show the kind of love for God's people that St. Paul commended the Colossians for? Or does your church family come in last, after your family at home and your friends and your co-workers? Do you feel guilty because you barely know the names of the people around you here and you just don't have the time to engage them and participate in church life? Do you have to admit that the person you love most is yourself? That you spend all your best efforts and the vast majority of your time pursuing the things that you want and everybody else comes in a distant second or third or fourth?

How can God see us the way he saw the Colossians? Through Jesus. That's the whole point of the hope that is stored up for us. God sees us as Jesus. He does that because he first saw Jesus as us. You all know that Jesus is the Son of God who took on human flesh and was born as one of us. But do you understand why he did that? He took our place. He lived the perfect life that we can't live. But when he went to the cross, God saw every sin that we have ever committed. He saw all our pride and lust and selfishness and all the words and actions that ever came from those sins in Jesus. He saw all the failure to love that you and I keep falling into. And he punished Jesus for them all. He made him suffer hell itself on the cross and then die.

But when Jesus rose, God told us that our sin was paid for. We are forgiven. God told us that now, when he looks at us, he doesn't see all that sin and failure. He sees Jesus loving God and loving his neighbor, so he sees us loving each other the way every Christian should. He sees us as perfect. Every time he tells us that, he renews our faith. That faith naturally gives birth to a whole life of serving God. We don't always see that. In fact, sometimes, we might not feel like we're very good Christians at all. But God sees us as holy and perfect. And God changes our hearts, quietly and slowly. The gospel causes that faith to grow in us even when we don't feel it, even when we don't know it, because the gospel is the power of God. Not even our sin can stop it from working. So we all do have a real reason to thank God: the fruit the gospel is bearing in our lives and in the lives of our brothers and sisters here.

II.

St. Paul didn't only give thanks for the growth in Colosse. He pointed out that the gospel was bearing fruit all over the world. Of course, for him, "the world" was a smaller place than it is for us. He thought in terms of the Roman Empire and the places just over the borders, which seemed very distant and exotic to him. But God's plan was to send that gospel into the whole world, even the parts that Paul never heard of. We live in the fulfillment of that plan. There are Christians in every nation on earth. **The gospel is bearing fruit all over the world.**

Let me give you one example: Vietnam. For years, the WELS worked with refugees from Vietnam, primarily Hmong people who were living in places like Minneapolis. But they shared the faith with friends and relatives back home. Today, our church in Vietnam has over 100,000 members and over fifty congregations. It's the only Protestant church that has official permission to work in Vietnam. In fact, the government of Vietnam sent a representative to our synod's headquarters in Milwaukee and asked us to build a theological training center in Vietnam. The gospel is bearing fruit all over the world.

But it isn't always easy to see that. God sees the Church winning because he sees it following his plan. But there are lots of reasons that we might see something different. Christianity is the largest religion in the world today. But Islam is growing faster and many people predict that it will overtake Christianity by 2075. In the United States, "spiritual but not religious" is the fastest growing religious "option" – and don't mistake that for a brand of Christianity. False teaching has divided and re-divided the church. The WELS is a statistical footnote. Pastors are in short supply. The WELS is a graying church body and we are struggling to fund our program at every level. Does it feel like the gospel is bearing fruit all over the world?

Maybe not. But it is. Not just because of things like the work in Vietnam. Even in our own congregation, the gospel is working. A few weeks ago, we reported that our school's projected attendance next year wouldn't be much better than this year's and the question was asked at our voters meeting if we are overstaffed. In the last couple of weeks, we've gotten applications for sixteen new students from Palabra de Vida, our Hispanic mission in Detroit. Sixteen. And while that presents a whole host of financial challenges, this week, the first special gift was pledged to help with those costs: \$8,000. And that's before we've even ramped up efforts to cover those costs.

But you know what? Even when we can't point to specifics like that, the gospel is still bearing fruit all over the world. The gospel is the power of God. It works, even when we don't see it. Sometimes, we Lutherans say that God is hidden. He hides himself in a sinful world. You can't always point to victories and successes. Sometimes, persecution destroys a church. Sometimes, people walk away from Jesus. Sometimes, false teaching divides the church and leads large numbers of people away from the gospel in its truth and purity. Jesus is hidden now. But he is still working. Before the world began, God chose all those who are going to believe and Jesus will bring every single one of those elect to faith. He will preserve the faith of every single one of them, no matter how much life hurts, no matter how many people turn away, no matter how powerful false religions and unbelief become.

How is that possible? Because Jesus hides himself in the gospel. He hides himself in words that seem forgettable and boring. He hides himself in the bread and wine of communion and in the water of baptism. He hides himself in shrinking congregations and churches that struggle to be relevant. He hides himself in all our efforts to teach our children to know him, to reach out into our community, to share the gospel in the whole world. And just when it seems like all our efforts are failing, he does something like that study center in Vietnam and those sixteen applications from Palabra de Vida to remind us that the gospel is still his power. It will always accomplish what God sends it to do. Whenever we preach that gospel, hearts will change, sinners will believe, fruit will come forth and Christians will be preserved to everlasting life. Trust those promises and commit yourselves to the work God has given us.

Today is Father's Day. If you think about it, this holiday really isn't about what we do for our dads. It's about what our dads have done for us. We're just saying thank you. Our Father in heaven has done so much for us and he is still doing more for us than we can ask or imagine. He sent his one and only Son to die and rise and save us. He gave us faith. He gave us his Word. He hides himself in the gospel and he brings his elect to faith. He promises that he will keep our faith alive and bring us home to heaven. That gospel message is bearing fruit here at Peace and around the world. Trust God's power and say thank you by hearing that message and showing the love that comes from our hope. Amen.