

Introduction:

- A. As the Elders explained at our meeting last Sunday evening, we are in the process of forming a transition team as a step toward eventually finding a new Senior Pastor after I step down in February. One of their main responsibilities is to assess Village Church's strengths and weakness, to listen to your concerns and ideas, and to get a fresh sense of who we are and where we're headed. Then the Pastoral Search Committee can use that information in looking for my successor.

I'll be frank with you: I'm always a little worried about these times when church leadership seeks congregational input. Here's why: in all my years, when asked, I've rarely heard God's people express concern about the most important things. Don't get me wrong. I think it is fine if you say that you think VCL needs a pastor who is younger, or who will do more community outreach, or who will bring a different approach to worship. It's fine to say that you'd like shorter sermons or more emphasis on children or better coffee. **But when you are asked, you each had better want what's most important and you'd better say so! Some things are too important to go without saying.**

- B. Turn to **Col. 1:25-27**. In the verses before this Paul portrayed the glory and supremacy of Christ over all things—over creation which he formed out of nothing and over the church whom he redeemed and raised from the dead with Jesus. Now listen to **vv.25-27**:

I have become its [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the

Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is... (What!?! What is this mystery!?! Here it is:)
Christ in you, the hope of glory.

I. AS BELIEVERS WE ARE GATHERED AROUND AND GATHERED IN TO GOD'S LONG-AWAITED MYSTERY: "CHRIST IN YOU, THE HOPE OF GLORY."

- A. Paul was entrusted with a God-given commission "*to present to you the word of God **in its fullness.***" God's prophets had been presenting God's word for centuries. That is what the Old Testament is. But in all that, God had kept the secret key. How will this all come together? How can all that God has promised actually happen? God hinted at it again and again but the hints were so veiled that not even the prophets themselves could piece together how God's salvation would work. It was the greatest of all mysteries.
- B. The Colossian church was infested with mystery-mongers peddling mystical secrets and drawing young believers away from simple faith in Jesus Christ. So Paul says, *You want mysteries? I'll give you the biggest one of all, and it is no longer a secret. In fact, we proclaim it from the rooftops. Are you ready?! Here it is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."*
- C. Do you remember the scene right after Jesus' resurrection when two disciples were on their way home to Emmaus? They could make no sense of what had just happened in Jerusalem: Jesus, whom they believed was God's Messiah, crucified and buried. Then, a report from women who went to his tomb only to find it was empty. They'd even said that the women "*had seen a vision of angels, who said he was*

alive.” **The two homeward bound disciples were bewildered.** Then Jesus appeared to them incognito. They didn’t realize it was him till later. In effect, Jesus said to them, you don’t need to recognize me. Just remember what your Scriptures said, and it all this will become clear.

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. [Luke 24:25-27]

Can’t you just hear them? “*I guess I never thought about it that way! You mean that Jesus was God’s Lamb dying for our sins? That the suffering Servant that Isaiah talked about is not us? It was Jesus!?*” **Jesus was beginning to unlock the mystery.**

- D. And if that isn’t astonishing enough, God then dispatched his own Holy Spirit—the very presence of Jesus Christ in Spirit form—to live *in* every person who put their faith in Christ to save them. They’d long believed that the Messiah would come to live *among* them as their King, but this?! “***Christ the Messiah in you!***” Who saw *that* coming!?

And another thing! This salvation and life was even offered to Gentiles who put their faith in Christ. This mystery was offered to *everyone*, the world over. All who trusted in Jesus the Messiah are united by the Holy Spirit into one body, the church, God’s own family. What’s more, we will live together forever, made new and clean, made like Christ himself, dwelling forever in the presence of God in the creation where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. “*Christ in you, **the hope of glory.***”

- E. This is why we're together. This is what makes us a church. This is our identity. This is what has been entrusted to us, here at Village Church and to all our brothers and sisters in other churches. This is our treasure, our singular distinctive in the world: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

Now, what does that mean for the way we think about our church? Back up one verse to **v.24**: "*Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.*" I spent a great deal of time thinking about that verse this week, for my own soul's sake. Here's one thing we need to remember:

II. GOD'S SERVANTS HAVE SUFFERED ON JESUS' BEHALF SO THAT WE CAN KNOW OUR RICHES IN CHRIST

- A. When Paul speaks of suffering he meant his imprisonment in Rome. Suffering usually seems so pointless. Imagine how helpless and useless Paul might have felt locked away in a Roman prison. His hands were tied, literally. Nothing he could do! Yet he didn't think that way. *The Message* puts it:
- I want you to know how glad I am that it's me sitting here in this jail and not you. There's a lot of suffering to be entered into in this world—the kind of suffering Christ takes on. I welcome the chance to take my share in the church's part of that suffering.*
- B. Paul is saying that in some sense, what he was suffering benefitted the Colossian church, even though they'd never met, because he suffered for them as a kind of surrogate for Christ. In some mysterious way, when Paul suffered there in prison he was absorbing into his body, in league with Jesus, the burdens of that faraway church.

Illus.: In Walter Wangerin, Jr.'s short story, "Ragman," a young man early on a Friday morning takes to the streets "pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new." He called out, "Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!" He comes to a brokenhearted young woman, poor and hopeless, weeping into her handkerchief. He slips away her handkerchief, replacing it with "a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined." Then as he walked on "he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then *he* began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear." In that same he way he took on a girl's blood-soaked bandage, his own head becoming bloody when he put it on. And a one-armed man's jacket, becoming one-armed in his place, and the filthy army blanket of a drunk who went away in new clothes. At the end of the story, now three days later on a bright Sunday morning, the observer of all this "said to [the Ragman] with dear yearning in my voice: 'Dress me.'"

I think what Paul is saying here that in serving Jesus' church he, too, became Jesus' ragman, absorbing into his body the sufferings of those Christ loves.

- C. So it is at Village Church. Others have *suffered for you, too.* For over 40 years, others have suffered in league with Jesus himself so that you might grow stronger in Christ. Some prayed till it hurt. They have wept over you, labored in ways you never saw nor could ever really appreciate. They have sacrificed for you, sacrificed in your place. They have served you with broken hearts, carrying on when others left. We possess the treasure of "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" because Christ's servants suffered for you, and they rejoiced to do so because there is nothing so valuable, enduring, or beautiful as Christ's church!

Now, let's look at what Paul writes *after* his Reveal. **1:28-2:3...**

III. THE MEASURE OF OUR CHURCH IS HOW DEEPLY WE KNOW AND LOVE JESUS

- A. **V.28** continues "*He is the one we proclaim.*" Of course, we proclaim Christ to lost people—people who need to be saved by Jesus. But that's not Paul's focus here. He's speaking about proclaiming Christ to the church, because if there is one thing we need—one thing we *always* need—is to know and love Jesus more deeply!
- B. "*He is the one we proclaim, admonishing every person...*" Part of announcing Jesus to God's people is *admonishing them—admonishing you.* This is a stern word: *warning*. This is the word of a father before his son or daughter head out on Friday night: "*Remember who you are!*" Why do we need to be *admonished*; *warned*? Because we live amidst the constant confusion and folly of the **world**, because of our own **fleshly desires** drag us down, and because of the **devil** whose native tongue is lying never stops talking. We are prone to wander from our treasured truth, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" Part of preaching and teaching, of fellowship and prayer, is a finger in our face and the warning, "*Don't add to Christ. Don't abandon Christ. Don't set your hope anywhere else. Don't let anything else become more important! Be careful.*"
- C. Our proclamation of Christ has another part: "*teaching every person with all wisdom...*" We must constantly be **schooled** in what "*Christ in you*" means and **tutored** in our "*hope of glory.*" These are not shallow mysteries. You haven't gotten to the bottom of them yet.
- D. When I prepared a syllabus I was told to tie every class activity to a Learning Objective (what we call in the

business an LO.) So what is the Learning Objective when we proclaim Christ to Village Church? ***“So that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.”*** That is why we are here together. That is why we worship and preach, why we have Growth Groups, why we pray for each other and with each other, why we love and teach our kids, and why we serve because serving in Jesus’ name schools us in Christlikeness. **If that isn’t what you most want from your church, you want the wrong things.**

- E. Our English versions might obscure this but the word ‘everyone’ actually occurs 3 times in v.28. It actually says, *“We admonish everyone, and teach everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”* The force of the word emphasizes **every individual**. The care of a church, regardless of size, always comes down to individuals, to each person’s maturity in Christ. A congregation doesn’t mature *en masse*. It’s always one by one.
- F. Now, in v.29, Paul comes back around to the price he was paying for those believers: *“To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.”* Here is a Christian servant in a wrestling match, with the safety and growth of fellow believers on the line. Look at the next line, in **2:1**, *“I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.”* Strenuously contending with who? Remember what he wrote in **Eph 6:12**, *“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”* That’s where the real battle is fought. Even in chains, even when he didn’t know them personally,

when he could not preach or visit, he would bow in prayer before God and he would *agonize* (that's the Greek word here) in prayer for them. He would remotely stymie the false teachers among them. He would beseech God to defend his beloved people. He would stand, Scripture-sword drawn, against the lies of the enemy in unseen realms. He would groan in support of their leaders like Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus whom he called his "*fellow soldier*." Later in this letter he tells them about their friend Epaphras who first told them about Jesus but was now with Paul. Paul says, he "*is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured*." We used to sing, "*I'm on the battlefield for my Lord*." That was how Paul and his compatriots came at prayer.

And if you think that isn't hard, look again at **v.29**, "*I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me*." Do you know of prayer that is so strenuous you need the infusion of Christ's resurrection power to prevail? That was the muscle in Paul's prayers.

G. Why did he wrestle so for them? **Vv.2-3**, "*My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love...*"

There's the LO again—the Learning Objective. Is that what our church is doing for you? **That's what we're here for.**

Going on: "*so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding...*" Knowing Christ opens our eyes to understand God, to understand our own souls, our relationships, how the world works, and what matters in life. To know Christ is to be rich! **That's what we're here for.**

And that leads to this: "*in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the*

treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” When Christ is in us, we embody all the treasures—treasures—“of his wisdom and knowledge.” Neither the Colossians nor us today will find any secrets, any spiritual mysteries, any other-worldly connections anywhere else that can even begin to compare with the riches we will find in Christ.

Conclusion

A few months from now when someone asks you what you want from your church, what you want a Search Committee to remember in seeking a new pastor, before you talk about preaching or music, our approaches to our community, or anything else, **tell them this: I want to be part of a church where the most important thing is to present everyone fully mature in Christ.**

I have to tell you, I’m not sure you’ll actually say that. I think you might agree with that here this morning, but when the time comes you might think that goes without saying. It doesn’t! When someone gives you the chance to express your opinion about the church, I am afraid you might skip right past what’s most important to get to something else that’s on your mind. You can express those things, too, of course, but do not forget what matters most. *Do not forget this!* Not to be patronizing but would you mind practicing: **I want to be part of a church where the most important thing is to present everyone fully mature in Christ.**

One more thing when they ask you. Remember the example of Paul *strenuously contending* for a church in prayer, and the example of Epaphras, *“always wresting in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.”* Whatever else you look for in your next pastor tell them this, **I want a pastor who is always wresting in prayer for us, that we may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.** Don’t settle for anything less.