

“Called as Partners in Christ’s Service: Reconciled through Him”Christine Chakoian  
Colossians 1:15-20  
John 1:1-5, 14, 16  
First Presbyterian Church  
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Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This fall we’re focusing on a key question: how – and why – do we do mission? And all the good intentions in the world can create a hot mess. Some of you may remember the book our missions pastor, Corey Nelson, shared with us called *Toxic Charity*. Toxic charity – it’s a great phrase that captures good deeds gone wrong.

So how do we do mission right? This time we’re focusing on another book Corey picked out for us before he left for Colorado: *Called as Partners in Christ’s Service*. If you haven’t picked up a copy, they’re still available in the church office, along with a brief study guide Pastor Dave wrote for us.

So let’s dive in.

John 1:1-5, 14, 16

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

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It's always poignant to me what people decide to include in their funerals, or in the funerals of their loved ones. Yesterday at Jean Mohr's lovely service, we had such a fitting tribute to a woman who was fearless, intentional, and put her life on the line for others. In 1964, she and Debby MacKenzie started the first childcare/after school program in Lake County ... she fought valiantly for civil rights and women's rights ... she was a friend of small and great alike. I love the Robert Browning poem that her beloved husband Frank picked out for her service, which includes this line: "she was ever a fighter." That captures Jean perfectly.

That reminded me of another poem that's often read at funerals - "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley. The writer speaks of his "unconquerable soul" in the face of all that is terrifying and dangerous. It culminates in these familiar words:

It matters not how strait the gate,  
     How charged with punishments the scroll,  
 I am the master of my fate,  
     I am the captain of my soul.

"I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

There is something courageous indeed about that attitude; I very much admire those who feel that brave.

And yet ... and yet I also know that there are times in all of our lives when we do not rise – we cannot rise – to that great height. Our “fall” from the height of courage and strength can come in thousands of ways.

Our fall can come from outside ourselves, as we’re pummeled by forces not of our own making. As I look back ...

- I think of a young friend in college who discerned she was gay, and endured unspeakable meanness and cruelty from girls on the floor. I don’t know how she made it.
- I think of a businessman I met in Lebanon when I was on the American University board there. He was a decent, upstanding man, but he *had* to grease the hands of those around him; corruption was the only option.

And our fall can come from within, as we trip over our own weakness:

- For me, it’s often my pride that seeks to prove I’m smarter, more eloquent, more competent than others.
- For my late mother, it was for a long time her dependency on alcohol that often sabotaged her better self.
- For a very successful businessman, a friend of mine in another church, it was his insecurity, he says, that led him to cheat on his wife, more than once.

As much as we want to be in charge of our lives – as much as we bravely pull ourselves up - there are times in all of our lives when we do not rise – we cannot rise – to that great height; there are times in all of our lives when we are nowhere close to being masters of our fate. And that’s precisely the time when faith shows its ultimate value. Faith is what whispers to us when we fall:

God is the master of my fate; God is the captain of my soul. And God will raise us up again.

And just in case we didn’t get what God hopes for us, Scripture reminds us: God came alongside us in the form of Jesus Christ, to walk alongside us in life and in death. God came to be near us in Jesus Christ, to lift us up from our fall to sin, whether our sin or the sin of those around us. God came to be near us in Jesus Christ, to reconcile us and draw us near to God’s heart, to cradle us in comfort and forgiveness, to whisper in our ear that we are not alone. God came to be near us in Jesus Christ, making peace with us, reconciling us, determining never to let us go.

The beginning words of the Gospel of John, which we hear most frequently at Christmas, are a fervent reminder of God’s power to save us, God’s choice to save us, God’s will to save us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There is no sin, no darkness that the light of Christ can’t overcome.

And that Word – that Word of love, that Word of life, that Word of light – that Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.

Last week, when Mother Teresa was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, my heart did a little leap of joy. Not only because of the good that she did, which was great – nor because she was perfect, but precisely because she wasn't. Mother Teresa – now St. Teresa – had massive doubts and fears, and fell into the emptiness of hopelessness more often than she could say. It stunned so many of us, because we thought she had it all together. And yet ... and yet she kept leaning on the everlasting arms of God; she kept doing the kind and compassionate work of Christ; she kept smiling her kindly, gentle smile; she kept touching the lepers and encouraging the weak. How did she do it? Not by her own power, she said. She could never do it by her own power. No, she said, in modesty:

“I can tell you about my path, but I'm only a little wire – God is the power. ... You will know what it is when you see it. It is very beautiful.”<sup>i</sup>

God is the power. ... You will know what it is when you see it. And so I have. I have seen signs of God's grace upon grace upon grace upon grace – signs of that grace as clear as the signs of our falling. I hope in the days ahead you'll be on the look-out for such sightings, such signs, but for now, let me just share a few examples with you.

- I saw the way God worked in my own mother's life. For a long time her dependency on alcohol had sabotaged her better self. But then, God lifted her up again. Not only did she come to know the beauty

of sobriety – she herself became a role model for many young women who’d been ashamed of their disease. She recognized she was powerless over alcohol, but that a power greater than herself could restore her to sanity. She trusted God.

- And my friend, the successful businessman? God lifted him up from his fall. He came not only to remain faithful to his wonderful wife – he grew to *cherish* her, to appreciate her beauty and wit and friendship and patience that had been there all along, right before his eyes. He accepted God’s forgiveness, and allowed God to show him what love, faithful love really looks like.
- I don’t know what happened to my young friend in college who was bullied and demeaned – we didn’t stay in touch - but I do know of another person just like her who went on to be a pastor, who has helped countless vulnerable teenagers and likely saved their lives. God lifted him up and gave him the gentle redemption of love, an acceptance that no one could ever take away.
- And the businessman I met in Lebanon? At great risk to himself, he’s managed to up-end a corner of corruption, to clean out a non-profit he cares about, so that at least the charitable dollars people give are used cleanly, used well, to do the work of ministry they’re intended to achieve. God lifted him up and he trusted God’s way, God’s truth, God’s life – a force more powerful than all the work of human greed.

I know – not every story ends happily-ever-after. There are plenty of places in this world still broken, still fallen, still mired in mud. But I also know this: God is in the business of resurrection – in the unlikeliest places. God is in the business of shedding light – in the darkest corners of the world.

As for us? Once we have felt this saving grace of God, we are called to share it, to help lift others from their dark and fallen places. Not by our own power, but by the power of God, we reach out in love and compassion. We are only a little wire – God is the power. ... We will know what it is when we see it. It is very beautiful.<sup>ii</sup> Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path* (NY: Random House, 1995), p. xi.

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