

Sunday, November 21, 2021

The People God Uses

(Message 12; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)
(Colossians 4:7-18)

Scripture

⁷Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

¹⁰My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) ¹¹Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. ¹²Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ¹³I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. ¹⁴Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. ¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

¹⁶After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

¹⁷Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord."

¹⁸I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. (Colossians 4:7-18)

Message

Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrinal statements, although they are essential. Christianity is not primarily a movement or a culture although it has impacted art and music, politics and economics, literature and philosophy, architecture and society, and philanthropy and charity.

Christianity is about God's **family** – about His **community**, about His Kingdom; it is about Jesus Christ and his followers; it is about individuals and groups; it is about His story and about our **stories**.

Throughout Colossians, Paul has laid out the theological foundation of Christ's eternal identity (He is sovereign God) and the call of His community to their global mission. People in community do things together commonly; we live life, write our "story" and we "*love to tell the stories*" that we cherish over and over again. The longer we live together in community, the deeper our stories go.

When we're part of a community, an extended "family," a close circle, even after we've been apart for a while, when we come back together, we're soon sharing our stories again – the new ones and the old ones, our individual stories, and the ones we experienced together.

There is nothing like being part of a community fully devoted to a mission (cause) and striving together with people we love (they will know we are Christ's by our love). There we find deep intimacy and profound purpose - the great adventure God created us to experience (i.e., the reason we were born). Together the stories are created and refined that we pass on to the next generation.

Colossians 4:7-18 is one of those passages of Scripture people generally skip over. On the surface it seems to provide very little teaching and the names are hard to pronounce. But these stories are rich; these are our family's stories. They are designed to encourage us in our faith journey.

These are the last verses Paul writes to believers in Colossae. Paul sends greetings from his small circle to theirs. He is in prison; he senses the end of his life is not far off. Paul pulls back the curtain for us, and we have the privilege of hearing some of the stories of people who encouraged Paul in his ministry. These stories are designed to encourage us as well.

Hopefully, we'll see in them the importance of being in community; the importance of encouraging one another in the mission; and the importance of knowing we are also writing this story with our life. We'll assign a one-word characterization to each person in Paul's inner circle; characteristics that are necessary in believers lives and qualities that are essential in the body of Christ. Paul shares ten stories with us (ten *short* stories ☺)

THE STORY OF TYCHICUS (4:7)

We first meet Tychicus in **Acts 20:4**. He is from the Roman province of Asia. Paul gives him a three-fold commendation: "*He is a dear (intimate), brother, a faithful (diligent) minister, and a fellow (humble) servant in the Lord.*" That is high praise from anyone - and this is the Apostle Paul.

The key word we'll assign to Tychicus is "**encourage.**" (It is found in 4:8 – "*I sent him to you for this very purpose...that he may encourage your hearts.*")

Scholars think Tychicus was the messenger who brought the money from the Asian churches to help the poor in Jerusalem (that would have been incredibly encouraging to the believers there).

Paul would send Tychicus to the churches (Paul had to be careful what he wrote being chained to a Roman guard who looked over his shoulder) to share how things were really going.

In **Ephesus (6:21)**, Paul writes, "*So you may know how and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything.*" So Tychicus would go to a church and tell them, "*Paul's okay, he is in God's hands. The gospel is spreading, the Church is growing,*" and people would be encouraged.

When we authentically share our experience of God's goodness, graciousness, and faithfulness, people are encouraged. When people are encouraged, people change; people mature.

A lot of you are encouragers; encouragers breathe life into a community; they get people going when they would otherwise give up. Never underestimate what a gift a word of encouragement is to your circle. Without encouragement people's spirit withers. Communities need encouragement like a fire needs oxygen.

THE STORY OF ONESIMUS (4:9)

Some of you know Onesimus was a runaway slave who being sent back to his owner by Paul. This story gets at the heart of community. The *New Community* Paul is talking about obliterates the old communities fraught with **old divisions**, boundaries, and hostilities. The New Community is dramatically different than the Old Community - all because of Jesus.

As a runaway slave, Onesimus could easily be tracked down and put to death – that was the penalty for running away. But Paul says it is different in the New Community: "*In Christ, there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised... slave or free. But Christ is all and in all*" (3:11). Paul calls Onesimus "*our faithful and dear brother*" (4:9)

The story of Onesimus – as we know - is found in the letter of Paul to **Philemon** (the slave's owner). It is a story of **grace**, forgiveness, and a renewed relationship so the key word in this story is **reconciliation**.

In Philemon, Paul appeals to the Onesimus' owner, a fellow believer, on behalf of Onesimus who ran away, because Onesimus is also a believer and has been very helpful to Paul.

Paul suggests: *“Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you.” (Philemon 11)* (Onesimus means “useful,” and it was almost exclusively a slave’s name).

Paul continues: *“He has been useful to me, and I could use him, but didn’t want to keep him without your consent. In fact, maybe that is why you were separated so that now you can be together forever – no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother.”*

Paul is not using pressure or his spiritual authority; Paul is focused on what it means to live in community, focused on love and focused on the transforming nature of the Gospel: *“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”*

A couple of decades later Ignatius refers to the Bishop of Ephesus (whose name, he writes, was Onesimus). This looks like the story of a slave who becomes one of the great leaders of the early Church. Now there is a story! In telling this story of reconciliation, Paul reminds us that **division**, disunity, in the church is unacceptable – even a little bit, even for a few days; the resulting bitterness festers like a cancer, gossip, and loose talk and can easily **destroys** the Body of Christ. Reconciliation to Christ is essential; reconciliation in the Church is essential. That is why following Jesus’ principles from **Matthew 18** are so important. Paul illustrates the reconciliation we experience in Jesus by reminding us of the story of Onesimus.

THE STORY OF ARISTARCHUS (4:10a)

Paul provides us just one phrase about Aristarchus: “My fellow prisoner...”

How long do we stick with someone who is in trouble? (Ever play ball behind your house and you - or even someone else - break a window? How fast do your friends run? That’s the essence of this story.)

In **Acts 19:29**, Paul was in Ephesus and a riot broke out. Aristarchus was there with Paul and shared his troubles. He didn’t run.

In **Acts 27:1-2**, Luke writes: *“It was decided that we were to sail for Italy. They transferred Paul and some of the other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius, embarking on a ship...and they were accompanied by Aristarchus.”* Scholars believe that for Aristarchus to go along, he must have attached himself to Paul as Paul’s slave so he would be allowed to stay close to him. The key word here is **loyalty**; loyalty is an essential part of a healthy community. Christ’s community requires a deeply loyal to the community and to one another in the community.

Most of us, I suspect, are pretty good at assisting others through short-term crises. We faithfully provide meals, cards, and transportation. How are we when people's issues are long term: chronic illness, continued financial problems, inability to keep a job, or relational troubles? Is loyalty a **practiced virtue** in our communities? Does that describe **you**? Do we stay through the hard times, when things don't go our way, or do we bail? What is your loyalty quotient? Aristarchus was deeply committed to Paul. He went to prison with Paul – voluntarily. That's loyalty.

THE STORY OF (JOHN) MARK (4:10)

Colossians 4:10 – *“My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas.” (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)*

Maybe you know this story. It starts in **Acts 13**. John Mark is invited to go on a missionary journey with Barnabas and Saul. He accepts. But in **Acts 13:13**, he decides to quit: *“I didn't realize this is what missions is all about. I'm cold; I'm tired; I miss my family and friends. I'm going home.”* And he does.

In **Acts 15**, Paul and Barnabas talk about going on another missionary journey. Barnabas says, *“I got a great idea. Let's take John Mark along”*; Paul says, *“No chance!”* Paul and Barnabas decide to split up. John Mark becomes the cause of the first major division in the Church.

Paul takes Silas and they head out; Barnabas reclaims John Mark, and they head in a different direction. The second time with Barnabas, John Mark proves himself faithful and continues to grow in spiritual maturity. Paul will later write to Timothy: *“Only Luke is with me. Go get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11).*

It is a beautiful story of redemption, of second chances. That's the key word here. God can take our unfaithfulness and transform it into faithfulness. John Mark blew it, and he knew it. He gained a reputation as **unfaithful**. Paul gave up on him. But Barnabas mentored him, and John Mark grew in maturity until Paul recognized his values and virtues as useful for ministry.

There are always people in communities who count the “John Marks” out: *“You've had enough chances. We can't keep doing this. You might as well leave; you'll never be used here again.”*

I'm very thankful I serve a God of second (and third, fourth, fifth, etc.) chances. I've needed so many chances I can't even count them. I am so thankful for God's grace. Paul writes here: *“If John Mark comes to you, welcome him in.”* We serve a God of grace and forgiveness, so we need to reflect his grace and forgiveness – over and over and over again – in everything we do.

God tapped this same John Mark whom Paul refused to have go with him, to write the first Gospel – it follows Matthew’s Gospel in our New Testament.

Maybe your life is like John Mark’s. You’ve messed up. Your big story is about how you failed. You tried ministry and it didn’t work out as planned. You had a relationship failure, a moral lapse, or you responded to the pressure by withdrawing. It is okay. We serve a God of second chances. Maybe you need some time for healing; that is understandable. But then come back. Determine not to spend the rest of your life on the **sidelines**. Get into the game! Use your gifts. Make a difference. Change lives for Jesus. And if you know of someone who messed up, don’t give up on them. Barnabas never gave up on Mark; he is an important part of the Story.

THE STORY OF JUSTUS (4:11a)

Justus, along with Aristarchus and Mark, are the three Jews in this list who were, along with Paul, living among and ministering to the Gentiles.

For many, that was problematic. They faced **ostracism** and expulsion from the synagogue for their *unclean* behavior. But they were willing to accept the consequences to bring comfort to Paul. Everyone needs comforting now and then; life is hard. Paul may have needed a special dose; his life seems especially difficult.

Anyone you know need comforting? Anyone going through a difficult time could use a phone call, a visit, a touch, a card, a hug, a listening ear? The key word here is **comfort** – not comfortable. Jesus never promised comfortable; quite the contrary, he promised trouble and persecution. Our only comfort is knowing we belong to Jesus in body and soul, in life and in death.

Has anyone ever said about you, as Paul says about Justus, that your comfort has been deeply appreciated?

THE STORY OF EPAPHRAS (4:12)

Paul continues to note the people God uses: “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you so you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured” (4:12).

Paul notes Epaphras, short for Epaphroditus, is “*wrestling in prayer*” (**interceded**) for us; the Greek word Paul uses is *agonizumi*, from which we get our word *agonize*. It is the picture of Jacob in **Genesis 32** where Jacob wrestles with the angel of the Lord (and says, “*I will not let you go until you bless me*” so the angel of the Lord blesses him).

Epaphras has a tremendous work ethic which he has brought to prayer – to the central work of the Church. He is actively interceding on behalf of others, Christ’s Church, and God’s Kingdom. Our denomination has invited us to make this a year of prayer – to pray more boldly, more earnestly, more continuously. The key focus here is **prayer**. The hard work of intercession, spiritual warfare, and praying the lost into the Kingdom.

Are we praying that people far from God will come closer to God? Are we praying **Kingdom Prayers – for the harvest, for revival, for unity, for Christ’s return?**

THE STORY OF LUKE (4:14)

In 4:14, Paul notes “*Our dear friend, Luke, the doctor...*”

This is the only time in the New Testament that Luke is called, *the dear doctor*. It is not often we call our physicians, “dear” or lit. “beloved.”

In Paul’s day, medicine was beginning to emerge as its own discipline; but apparently Luke gave up his practice to assist Paul. (Or) Maybe Luke went along to assist Paul with his “*thorn in the flesh*” (which some believe may have been a physical issue). (Or) Maybe Luke went to assist with the mission God had called him and Paul to together.

The key word here is “sacrifice.” Jesus calls all who would follow him to take up their cross (sacrifice) and follow him. Sometimes it is a career sacrifice like Luke made. But sacrifices come in all shapes and sizes: financial, relational, social, reputation, location etc.

God called Luke to be a doctor, then a missionary, and finally an author. (Luke wrote both the *Gospel of Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles*). (This is an amazing over-achieving community of believers. We have John Mark who wrote the second Gospel, Luke who wrote the third Gospel and Acts, and Paul who wrote thirteen “letters” included in the New Testament.) If we are willing to make sacrifices for the Gospel and God’s Kingdom, there is no limit to how God can use us.

All too often we forget that Jesus didn’t call us to a coffee time, he called us to a crucifixion. He didn’t call us to a party, he called us to a partnership in suffering; he didn’t call us to a building, he called us to a battle. **God** is going to call each of us to make sacrifices during our lifetime for Him – maybe a big one, maybe a career change, maybe a significant gift, maybe our time. But he will call. Will you respond? Will you endure some pain for the sake of the **Gospel**?

THE STORY OF DEMAS (4:14)

This is a **sad** story. The only one in this list. But sad stories can be as helpful as the joyful ones. Demas is the one person in this list without a **description** attached.

There was a time when Paul considered Demas a “*fellow worker*” (**Philemon 24**). Here in **Colossians 4:14**, he is just called Demas; in **2 Timothy 4:10**, Paul will write, “*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*”

Demas once stood side by side with Paul. But he slowly drifts away. And then, we never hear about him again. The drift in his life went unchecked; he eventually left the community. Paul Little says, “*Collapse in the Christian life is seldom a blowout, it is usually a slow leak.*”

Jesus warned of this in the parable of the Sower. Some seed initially takes root, but then is choked out by the thorns (i.e., the cares of this world.)

Sometimes the cares and enticements of this world snare us; sometimes they just slowly pull us away because we get busy, distracted, self-absorbed. Sometimes it is a conscious decision; all too often it is an unconscious reality. This is the sad story of Demas.

This story is a reminder to do a regular **heart check** – even now, today. We **leak**. We need to constantly care for our heart and soul. The key word here is **perseverance**. The fire needs to be tended. We need to be **diligent**; we need to be faithful.

THE STORY OF NYMPHA (4:15)

“*Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house*” (4:15). Nympha was likely a widow or unmarried or they wouldn’t be calling it “her house.” But Nympha has a house large enough to host a **church**.

Up until the third century the church did not have (own) property or church buildings; gatherings were in homes. The early Church was dependent on people’s hospitality. In Judaism, to have a synagogue, you needed to have ten males (women didn’t count) (i.e., you could have a thousand women and only nine males and you wouldn’t be able to have a synagogue in your city). In the New Community, that is all changed.

First, the Church went out and found a new word to describe their *gathering*: they called it, *ecclesia* – the “*called out ones*.” It wasn’t the only change. Now slaves, and Gentiles, and women counted; this is at Nympha’s house; Nympha is the host; Nympha – all by herself - is the quorum; Nympha is the leader.

The key word here is **inclusion**. Paul said it a few verse back: Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free, rich or poor, old or young – there is a place at the table for you. It is the Lord’s Table. Welcome. If you love Jesus, you are part of the **family**.

THE STORY OF ARCHIPPUS (4:17)

Paul writes – “Tell Archippus: “See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.” (4:17) (The key word here is “completion**”).**

We don’t know Archippus’ task, but apparently, he isn’t finished yet and apparently it had dragged on for a while. What a difference it makes in community if people finish the task they’ve started, if they have followed through on what they promised. It is essential to community for members to be promise-keepers, to be reliable (*liable* means responsible; *re* means over and over again).

Thank you, seniors, for generations of prayer and service. Thank you, teachers and mentors, for countless lessons shared with tenderness. Thank you, missionaries, for your bravery in sharing the Gospel in hostile world. Thank you to all who practice on Monday what you learned on Sunday. Thank you for the countless hours you’ve spent in meetings, on your knees, in hospital rooms, teaching scripture, sharing your testimony and life. The Gospel rides on the back of faithful servants.

But we all know stories where people got enthused and excited at the beginning, then ran into a few issues, ran out of **steam**, and the task remains incomplete. (Every time I go to lead a *Deeper Journey* in Illinois, there is this huge concrete structure at my exit off I39 – an unfinished church worship center without windows, doors, or a roof. It has been unfinished as long as I’ve been going there – over ten years!)

Don’t lose your first love or your enthusiasm; don’t let the task slide; keep your promises. Communities are built on keeping promises, following through, finishing; anything else makes the Church – and Christ - look foolish. Our God is the God of covenants; God promises. God keeps his promises.

Paul doesn’t address Archippus directly here. Instead, he asks the Church (you and me) – “*see to it that Archippus completes the ministry.*” We have a role; we are called to step in when the work is slipping and someone needs our help to bring it to **completion**...as **Christ** does in us.

PAUL (4:18)

Paul ends this marvelous letter saying, “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.” (His letters were likely dictated.) “Remember my chains.”

As Paul writes these final words, you can hear the chains rattle; but he doesn't ask for sympathy, or even for prayers.

Most people would consider these chains a sign of disgrace and weakness; Paul considers them a symbol of the power of the Gospel (they are a significant part of his story).

Paul doesn't say, "*Remember my brilliant words, my powerful preaching, my inciteful writing, my spiritual maturity.*" Paul says, "*Remember my chains.*"

Paul is saying, "*I write as one who knows the cost of following Christ; I have been there. It's part of my story. My story is not about title, position, wealth, diplomas, or glory. My story is about Jesus. My life is not my own. I've suffered for his sake. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race. Now my story is now complete.*"

Ten stories. Nine of the ten were disciples of Christ who lived into his Mission. Together, they are the story of **Christianity, the story of the **Church**, the story of the followers of Jesus. It is our story. It is THE story. What story is God writing in **your life** that is being added to this story? Remember, he is writing it so the **world** might read it. *Grace be with you.***

Let 's stand for closing prayer.

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