



“There Is a Tide”

Colossians 2:6-15

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July 25, 2010

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

The Christian faith and the Christian church ask a lot from us. Faith, if we take it seriously, includes a variety of demands. The very heart of faith is a life given to and directed by God. That includes prohibitions – more than a few “thou shalt nots — and admonitions — “love your enemies.”

Faith is often inconvenient. Serious faith takes time and effort. It places us in a living community which is commissioned to do God’s work on earth. Faith is a lifestyle with limitations and expectations. It isn’t easy and isn’t meant to be easy.

The Christian church asks a lot from us. There is, of course, the time and effort required by life in community and its set of built-in friends. There are a variety of alternative activities on a summer Sunday morning, yet here we are.

The work of the church is dependent on volunteers who sacrifice time and effort on behalf of the congregation. We expect one another to participate in church activities beyond worship.

Those who engage in the governance of the church devote even more time and effort to decision-making, planning and organization. Much of the time the work of church leaders is second-guessed, often criticized. As one of my seminary professors put it, “Church leadership is a high demand/low stroke environment.”

And, of course, it takes money, our money to keep the church running. There never seems to be enough and giving to the church is not the most exciting charity available. It’s tough to excite generosity for paying the light and gas bill. We want more visionary opportunities for our charity dollars.

I suspect all of have asked ourselves, “Is it worth all this time, effort and frustration?” I know I ask that question from time to time. Why bother with organized religion? What does church life have to do with real life, life at home, at work, and in the world? Many people don’t think it is worth the trouble.

The Epistle Lesson, Colossians 2:6-15, offers one answer to those questions. I think it is a compelling answer. At first glance the text sounds like abstract and somewhat strange religious prose. True enough. However, beneath the oddness of an ancient religious text are several images or metaphors that give it meaning all these centuries later.

I want to use a larger image to open up the text to our modern thinking.

I discovered a fascinating and exciting phenomenon on Martha’s Vineyard last week. In a spot on the north end of the island the incoming tide runs parallel to the shore for several hundred yards. People on that part of the island participate in what they call the “Tide Ride.” They enter the tide where it begins its shore run and float several hundred

yards to a dock that has a roped-in swimming area. The ride ends when you float under the dock and catch the ropes on the down tide side. Riders then haul themselves onto the dock and often traipse back and ride the tide again.

The event is accompanied by yelps of delight and excitement. The secret is to go with the flow. You can't fight a four mile an hour tide. I watched a strong swimmer try it and lose. You have to jump in and give yourself to the tide.

Colossians 2 invites us to a unique, powerful and transforming Tide Ride.

The lesson begins with a powerful and easily overlooked phrase, "You have received Christ Jesus as Lord..." Sometime earlier, a Christian missionary introduced a new way of thinking and living to the people in the city of Colossae (in modern Turkey). The missionary called it good news. It goes something like this:

- The world is not the way it's supposed to be.
- God is in the process of making things right in the world.
- God sent Jesus Christ into the world to set things right. His teaching reveals God's will for us. His death and resurrection unleashed the power of eternity into all who receive Jesus Christ as Lord.
- Repent and believe this good news.

A significant number did receive Jesus Christ as Lord, and a new church was formed. That simple message still lies at the heart of the Christian faith; we who receive Jesus Christ as Lord become children of God, and Jesus Christ lives in us with a view to changing us.

But there is more to that little phrase, "You received Jesus Christ as Lord" than appears to modern readers of the text. The word "received" means more than personally accepting Jesus Christ as Lord — though it certainly means that. The term is ordinarily used to describe the process of receiving a tradition and passing that tradition on.

In this case the tradition received was the story about Jesus of Nazareth — his life and his teaching and the belief that in Jesus Christ, God is putting the world and us right. That story was told, told again and then retold long before there was a written New Testament. The story bore inherent power, and everywhere it was told people received that tradition as the word of God — and lives changed.

To receive Jesus Christ as Lord is to accept that now ancient story and enter into it, trusting our life to the Christ revealed in the story. In fact, the story is older than Jesus. It is the story of the people of God beginning with Abraham and Sarah. It is wider than confines of ancient Israel. It reaches to the ends of the earth. We belong to an ancient story and an ancient and international people.

The powerful story of Jesus Christ is like a tide that sweeps through the world inviting everyone to jump in for the ride of a lifetime. It is a story larger than any of us or all of us. It is a tide with eternal power and irresistible momentum. When we go with its flow, the tide transforms us.

Most important of all, the tide of the Christian tradition is inhabited by Jesus Christ himself. The text goes to great pains to note that we who are in the divine tide are united with Christ. Our lives are tangled up with his and with all the other people of God riding that divine tide. To be in the tide is to be in touch with eternity.

But there is more. Paul changes metaphors dramatically. We who received and entered into the tide of the Christian tradition need to remain rooted, grounded and established in it. It is a living tradition rooted, grounded and established in Jesus Christ. Staying

rooted and grounded in Christ takes some effort, time and energy. It is a relationship that must be nurtured, fed and encouraged. “As you were taught,” the text says, “stay rooted, grounded and established.” We have to apply ourselves to the Christian tradition, learn it, and participate in its story.

We are part of a living tradition — not some ancient historical tale — and it is made alive by entering and participating in the tradition. We have to leap into the tide of that living story. And we have company. The entire church in the past and around the world, including this community, is part of the living tradition.

Now I have a confession to make. Up on Martha’s Vineyard, I watched the Tide Ride. I didn’t actually participate in it. So I really don’t understand its power. I’ve seen it, not experienced it.

It reminds me of the difference between seminary and congregation. In seminary, I was a careful observer of the Christian tradition. I learned about it, examined it, and learned to love it. But I hadn’t yet really lived in it. I’d been in school all my life.

When I became a pastor, I was forced to leap into the tide and let it bear me along. I was an observer no longer. It was exhilarating. Things I’d studied and thought about for years were suddenly living all around me. I recall, especially, teaching and preaching my way through the entire Sermon on the Mount. It took a year and a half. Every day I thought about it and figured out ways to teach it and apply it.

I was astonished by its power some 2,000 years after Jesus uttered it. My congregation was taken by it and began to change. Most important, I watched myself change. Participating in the tide of the Christian tradition was transforming.

As Shakespeare put it in *Julius Caesar*, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.”

There are alternative tides all around us. We entrust our lives to some of them and throw ourselves into them seeking rewards and gratification. Some of those tides are destructive, most of them divert our attention from God’s transforming tide. I know.

After four years of pastoral work, I returned to school to earn a doctorate. My reason was partly ambition and partly upward mobility in my profession along with other motives, both benign and positive. This time I was really an observer. I learned more about the Christian tradition than I imagined I’d ever know. I became an expert in Christian origins, early Christian history, biblical languages and the history of the entire tradition. Most of all, I was amazed by the Christian tradition’s capacity to survive its own corruption, to say nothing of surviving its enemies. It was a wonderful time with little participation in the living reality of the Christian tradition.

After five years, I leaped back into the tide in another congregation. I learned in new ways how I was committed to and part of something beyond myself in a community deeply committed to living in the tide of God’s grace and love.

Alternative tides, like ambition or upward mobility, offer gratification and rewards. But at the end of the day, the month, or our life, what then? What kind of person is formed by the powerful tide of ambition and careerism? I know it didn’t do much for my character or my faith. When we’ve achieved everything we dreamed we’d accomplish and have experienced everything we’ve desired, what then?

As I’ve told you, one of the honors of pastoral life is listening to people planning the funeral of a loved one. They seldom, if ever, talk about the deceased person’s accomplishments, status or wealth. They talk about what kind of person Grandma, or Aunt Rosie, or Dad was. And they are blessed and healed by the memories of deep

character and the power of love. What kind of person are we becoming? “There is a tide....”

When we ride the tide of the Christian tradition, we enter into a story beyond ourselves, a story that bears transforming power. For one thing, we belong to a new order in the world. In the next chapter, the apostle says that one consequence of the Christian tradition is that we are part of a community that transcends race, class, gender and politics. “In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (3:11). We belong to a people, a new creation, that is both historical and international. The larger story of faith is our story too.

This week I read comments on this text by an English New Testament scholar who said most of the people of his generation did not experience the Blitz that shaped an entire generation of British people. But, he said, we have heard that story and it is our story too. While we did not experience the Blitz, we have participated in it. It is our story. It is a living tradition that will forever bear power.

The Christian story, the tide of God’s grace in the world, is not a mere story. It has consequences. It is taking us somewhere specific. Changing metaphors again, the text describes the new creation. This is what people and the Christian community are like when we ride God’s tide. It’s like putting on a new suit of clothes, the apostle writes:

As God’s chosen ones...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and...forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts (3:12-14).

Riding the tide of God touches every part of our lives: work, family, relationships, play and, of course, church. We are part of a process that, by word and Spirit, forms our inner person and makes us what God intends us to be.

I don’t know why, but I’ve been thinking about my late father-in-law this week. Gene was a mountain boy from the hills of West Virginia who achieved the American Dream. When he was an adolescent, two Presbyterian missionary women came to Jerolds Valley, West Virginia, in the heart of coal country, and told the people there about the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Gene and his family leaped into that tide and rode it the rest of their lives.

The family was ruined by the Great Depression and moved to Ohio, where Gene finished school and began life as a carpenter, the family tradition. He formed his own construction company and became a successful businessman.

Behind his success was a commitment he made to God as a teenage boy. He would not let a day go by without making something beautiful with his hands. He kept his vow. He was deeply moved that his profession, carpentry, was the profession of his Lord, Jesus Christ.

When he retired, he devoted his life to his garden — still making something beautiful every day. He told me he felt like Adam in the Garden of Eden who had divine orders to tend God’s garden.

Like many people, Gene’s deepest self was revealed when he prayed. He always prayed before meals — he would not let any of us off say the blessing. He would bow his head and open his heart to God and to us. It always took him a while to get to the food. He thanked God for life, opportunities and his family — always his family. He told us a hundred times that God and family are the most important things in the world.

Plymouth Church
Sermon 25 July 2010

Gene was a tough man in a tough business. He was a man's man. But life floating in the powerful tide of God's grace made him a beautiful person.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.”

Amen.

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