

“Don’t Wander Off”

John 15:1-13 • Colossians 2:6-23

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Have you ever experienced the feeling of being lost? I mean really lost. You have no idea where you are. Nothing looks familiar. When we lived in Pittsburgh we often had that experience. This was in the days before we owned a GPS. There are no major loops around the city. Instead, they have what they *call* beltways. If you’ve been on the beltway in places like Houston it’s nothing like that. The belts in Pittsburgh are just signs with colored spots put up along streets to let you know you’re going the right way. They’re kind of like those little trail markers on hiking trails.

The problem is that the signs were put up many years ago and some of them have gone missing and others have had plants grow up and cover them. So if you don’t already know where you need to turn you very likely may miss the turn and end up lost.

Worse than ending up lost because you missed a sign is getting lost because you weren’t paying attention. You can’t blame the highway department for that. When I was young I can remember several instances when my grandmother would say, “don’t wander off.” She had four male grandchildren and apparently the rest of them were prone to wander off where she couldn’t find them. I’m certain I never did.

Sometimes when we were all together we would be wearing nice clothes. So she would say, “Don’t wander off and don’t get dirty.” I’ll give you one guess what happened when all those boys wandered off in their good clothes. In this morning’s passage from Colossians, Paul tells the Christians in Colossae not to wander off. And his warning is more than just not getting dirty. For the Apostle Paul, this is the heart of the gospel, the good news.

The Colossians had been taught the truth about Jesus and they had gladly believed. They had seen the Holy Spirit at work in their church. But then some false teachers – the Gnostics – tried to tell them that they needed more. They told them that the simple truth

about Jesus was not enough. Paul says, don’t wander off from the faith that you were taught. Don’t fall for anything else. Don’t be taken captive.

Sadly we have to teach our kids to be aware of their surroundings, especially in parking lots at night. We teach them to be wary of vans without windows parked near their car. Why? Because sometimes the people in the van intend to take them captive. So we tell them to pay attention to who is parked around them. We tell them not to walk out to their car alone. Paul is giving a similar warning to the Colossians and to us. He tells us to be alert, to recognize false teaching so that we are not taken captive by it.

Ok, it’s time for a pop quiz. Raise your hand if you consider yourself a theologian. A couple of weeks ago we talked about the importance of theology to your life. Remember that we said that theology begins with the question of who Jesus is. And the New Testament – both the gospels and the letters – makes it pretty clear that Jesus is God in person. Paul thinks it’s so important that he repeats it here just one chapter later. In verse 9 he says, “For in him (Jesus) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Jesus is not just partly divine. Who is Jesus? He is fully God.

But theology is also always practical. So theology also seeks to answer the question, “does it matter?”. Theology is never just theoretical. It always matters to your life. So after Paul says that the fullness of God dwells in Jesus bodily, he goes on in verse 10, “and you have been filled in him.” Why does it matter? Because in Jesus you don’t just have access to God, you can be filled with him. You can’t hold all of God as Jesus did but your entire life can be filled with God.

Here’s an example of what Paul is trying to say. If you take a jar down to the beach you can fill it up to the top with water from the ocean. That jar can never hold all of the ocean, or even the bay in our case, but the jar can be filled with

the fullness of the ocean. Similarly, Jesus being infinite and fully divine is the fullness of God. When you dip your small life into his fullness, you too will be filled with him. When that happens you will then be more like Jesus. Your life will be characterized by love and as we know from Jesus love is always sacrificial.

Paul presents two critically important theological concepts in this passage. He begins by saying, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." He kind of mixes his metaphors here. He says that we are to be rooted in Christ. The roots of a plant collect water and nutrients that the plant needs to flourish. In fact, generally healthy plants have nearly as much root structure underground as they have visible structure above the ground.

The second metaphor is that of a building being built on a foundation and starting to take shape. As you know buildings have to be built from the ground up. Nobody's figured out how to start with the roof and work down. I think in using these metaphors Paul is pointing us to Psalm 1 that was our Call to Worship. The person blessed by God is the one who walks in the way of righteousness. He will be like a tree planted by a stream. As you know many parts of Texas can get pretty dry during the summer. But if there's a stream or river that runs through the area the banks will be lined with healthy, flourishing trees. When you are rooted and built up in the truth of Jesus, you will be like those trees.

The theological concept that Paul is presenting here is known as *justification*. It's a legal term and it means that in Christ, God has declared you not guilty. In fact, he declares you to be holy. He says that you have been "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." He's referring to Jesus' death and burial. In Romans, writing for the Holy Spirit, Paul is clear that the wages of sin is death. He repeats it here in verse 13: "you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with him,

having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Without this, without the work of Christ applied to us by the grace of God, we would have no hope. That's justification. In verse 12 Paul links justification with baptism, which is the sign of our justification. That's why we baptize infants. It's a sign that God is working in us long before we could ever respond. That's also why we are only baptized once. Baptism is primarily about what God has done for us.

The other theological concept we find here is called *sanctification*. That's a big word but it basically means to become holy. Where justification is declared by God, sanctification is a lifelong process to become what God has said you are. A theologian from a hundred years ago used this great illustration. If a large ship's engines fail and the ship is dead in the water it must be towed back to a harbor. Once in the harbor the ship is safe. But it's not sound. It must still be repaired. It's the same with us. Justification is God telling us we're safe. Sanctification is our cooperating with God to become sound. The blessed person from Psalm 1 delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. The sign or sacrament of our sanctification is the Lord's Supper. That's why we take it over and over again. Every time we take the Lord's Supper together we are reminded that we need to actively stay close to Jesus, which is what Paul here means by walking in him.

The rest of the passage describes some of the things the false teachers tried to get the Colossians to do in order to have "higher" faith. Paul says that faith in Jesus is simple. You don't need special diets or festivals. You don't need to give up certain things – that's asceticism. You don't need to worship angels or other spiritual beings. You need to have a relationship with Jesus. You need to be rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught. You need to hold fast to the head, which is Jesus. Jesus is higher and better than

any other rulers and authorities. He has conquered them all.

There's one last thing that Paul describes here. If you are rooted and built up in Jesus, if you are not wandering off but staying close to him, you will not only know the truth but your life will be "abounding in thanksgiving." It's nearly impossible to deceive thankful people. If

you are thankful for what you have then you're not looking for more. The Gnostics didn't make much progress with the thankful people and they won't make much progress with you if you are genuinely thankful for Christ in your life. Because he's enough. So don't wander off.

Amen.