

FLOURISH Week 1

Monday, September 13

Recently, our Granada Church staff spent time on a day retreat in Coconut Grove. The goal for our time together was to review our ministries, take stock of where we are, and then plan forward for ministry based on our church vision. The setting where we began in the Grove was the outdoor space at a restaurant called Glass and Vine. It is just up the hill from Peacock Park, which lies right on Biscayne Bay. We were seated under spreading Florida oak trees, shaded from the harsh summer sun. There we began with a passage from the book we will be studying for the days ahead, the book of Colossians. Paul, an apostle of Jesus, wrote this letter to a fledgling church to encourage them, to teach them about their new-found faith in Christ and to add structure to what they believed. You could say he was fleshing out the gospel for them. Now, in that beautiful setting surrounded by the flora of the Grove, we spoke about life. What sustains it. How it thrives and comes to flourish. This whole idea of flourishing, the focus of Paul's letter, is the purpose of our study. It is this metaphor that Paul uses a number of times in the book. Here are a few of those places. In verse 5 to 6 of chapter one we find the words: ...

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth...

Here is this metaphor of a plant, and how it can come to thrive in such a way that it produces life, and yes, new life through fruit. In describing this happening with a plant, Paul talks about what God has been doing among them, and what they will need as a church to grow more and more.

Now, at that retreat, I brought along a plant from my office. The leaves were drooping. You could tell that it was in a very sad state. During COVID-19, there were many days that I was working from a little office in my home. Out of sight, out of mind, the plant was neglected. It was a perfect illustration of what we were learning about: the care needed for things to not only survive, but also to thrive. Perhaps, you could call it a cautionary tale. Just as that little plant needs regular tending and has a state in which it will flourish, our lives and our community do as well. That is what we will be learning about and immersing ourselves in during the weeks ahead. You might call the little book of Colossians “the care and feeding of a Christian community.” As we dig into the book more deeply, we will learn what this thriving life is and how we can live it right where we are. For that little plant from my office, it had definitely been lacking water. Though it was amazingly resilient, it was struggling. I think a cactus plant would have been a better candidate for life in my office. That's the thing. There is a nature that differs from plant to plant, from living thing to living thing. If you buy a plant, often there will be a tag on the plant that gives you the common name of the plant, along with the instructions for the care of the plant. Does it require full or partial sunlight? Does it like to stay moist or dry? And, so on. The church is a living body, and each different congregation of people may require different care at different times in its life. Each spiritual community faces obstacles to growth and also threats from the outside. This is true for the church in Colossae. It is also true for the church here in Miami, and for Granada in particular. We'll be looking at those challenges a little later on in our study. We will take time to consider what is unique to our spiritual community. This is also true for your life.

This year Sandy and I have faced experiences that are new to us and stress we did not expect. This is something that many of us have experienced during COVID-19. We found ourselves in need of care that we've never needed before. I love the letters of Paul to the churches because each church is so different. The foundations of the gospel are laid out in the same way in each letter, but there is also the unique instruction, the teaching geared to the needs of each specific fellowship of believers. That's the thing about the gospel, as we will learn. It speaks a word of grace to every person, but it also provides us instruction for the place where we find ourselves. As we work through the book of Colossians in the days ahead, you will discover God's word of grace directed to you. It may be a word of encouragement or perhaps a word of instruction or challenge. Look for God to speak to you during this time. Listen to see how he is directing you by his Holy Spirit.

Now, before we left that retreat in the Grove, each person was given a small developing plant of their own to take home and nourish. The plants were vegetables and spices, all different and requiring care unique to them. I challenged our staff to help them grow, to care for them and tend them in the days ahead because we will check their progress later on. What if we do that personally during the seven weeks ahead? What if we focus on growth in Christ, as individuals and for our fellowship? We want to not only learn about the flourishing life. We want to live it.

Let's pray:

Lord God, our creator and sustainer, you made us and know what is needed for our care. You know what we need to thrive. Help us to trust in you and your care for us. In the days ahead, teach us your ways that we might walk in your truth. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, September 14

As we begin the letter of Colossians, we find Paul the apostle of Jesus in prison. Yes, he is writing his letter from prison. The middle-east at the time was a shame-based culture, and it remains so today. That means that people feared being shamed in the community more than anything else. Status in your community, how you were seen and considered by others, determined the trajectory of your life. To be put in prison for any reason was to lose status, to lose friends, and to lose the support you needed to survive. And, Paul was not just anyone. He was schooled by the best of the rabbis. He came from the best of the tribes and had the strongest credentials possible. Before he came to faith in Christ, he was a man of standing in the community. What has happened to him? Jesus confronted him while he was on a journey to the city of Damascus. His mission was to hunt down and persecute Christians. At the time, Christians were seen as little more than an offshoot of Judaism, a heretical movement that needed to be stamped out. And, Paul was only too happy to do the stamping. His determination to oppose Christians gave him even greater status among his own people. Here's how Paul describes his story:

...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ... -Philippians 3:4-8

Yes, here Paul gives us his resume, and at the same time, he says his encounter with Jesus opened his eyes to the fact that his resume was rubbish. Compared to life in Jesus, the things he could say about himself were empty, no reason for boasting at all. What happened after that is one of the most shocking stories in all of scripture. The guy, proud to be Jewish and hunting down Christians for sport, became a follower of Jesus. The Jew of the Jews became the missionary to the Gentiles. How did this happen? In the face of legalistic Judaism, the moral code of the law that Paul could never fulfill, he received forgiveness through Christ. All that he could not achieve by his religious practice, even as an extremist, was given to him freely by God. The very thing he sought to oppose became his life. You see, this explains why we find Paul, though he should be in shame sitting in a Philippian jail, is instead:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... -Acts 16:25

Really? Paul is in prison. He doesn't know what will happen next. He is praising God. How can he be doing that? Faith in Christ reframed his life. Reframing is taking the same picture, the same situation, and placing it in a new context. He is there in prison for the sake of Christ, because he was sharing the gospel. He knows he is there by the will of God, the purposes of God are being revealed in his life. He has joy in God that the prison cannot take away. Yes, that night there is an earthquake that shakes the prison. But I like to think there was an earthquake before the earthquake. Paul was praising God in prison. The prisoners are listening to Paul and Silas praising

God, and they must think they are off their rocker. Indeed, it seems strange. But because of the gospel and what Jesus has done for him, Paul has come to trust the will of God in his life. As Paul states in his letter to the Christians in Rome,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? -Romans 8:31-32

He knows if God has given his own Son on his behalf, God will not withhold anything from him. He knows that God is for him. This is the assurance that we have when we understand the gospel, when we come to see how God has loved us, and when we know that nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Because Paul can see this, he begins to see his prison experience, not as a mistake, but as a God-ordained opportunity in his life. His situation does not lead to complaints against God or pleas for his release. You will hear none of that in this letter. Now, mind you, he doesn't want to be in prison, but he knows that this too remains in the hands of our sovereign God. Yes, this would have brought Paul immense shame if he was living out of his self-constructed identity. But that is not the case for Paul as he is resting in Christ, and as he knows himself to be loved by God. How does the gospel, God's love for you, reframe your life? How does the love of God for you bring you joy when your circumstances may not be ideal? How can you rest in God's love for you today?

Let's pray:

Loving Father, the perspective of everything in my life changes when I see Jesus. I know that, despite my circumstances today, I am loved by you. We know whatever happens to us today flows from your goodness. Remind us of your presence in our lives and of your faithfulness that is new every morning. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, September 15

Thinking about Paul in prison as he is writing the letter to the church in Colossae, I remember reading the story of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian author. As a dissident writer, he was arrested and sent to prison where likely he would die. When he entered prison, he considered that his life was over. But there in the darkness, with everything stripped away, God came to him. Revealed himself. The prison Aleksandr thought would be his death was. He died, and a new man was raised up. When Solzhenitsyn left prison, he kissed the walls and the floor and said:

Bless you, prison. Bless you for being in my life. For there, lying on the rotting prison straw, I came to realize the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.

It was there in prison that God gave him his life mission, to record and tell the truth about the Soviet darkness. The dissident became the servant. Still writing, but then in a larger story with God at the center. Reading about Paul's time in prison, Paul began to see how the Lord was using him there. Now, another one of Paul's letters written while he was in prison, the letter to the Philippian church, is filled with joy. In chapter one of that letter, as he is speaking about his time in prison, he says:

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. -Philippians 1:12-13

Yes, during this time in prison in Rome, he can begin to see how God is working. Actually, this isn't the last imprisonment for Paul. He spent three years in prison in Israel because of false charges that were brought against him by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Along the way, the leaders concocted an assassination plot against Paul. But his life was spared when he was moved from one prison to another. Then Paul, since he was born in a Roman province as a free man and thus a Roman citizen, appealed to Rome. By doing so, this would ensure his safety for a

time and also give him an opportunity to stand before the emperor. Now, I don't think Paul ever felt what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn did, that his life was over. But it is true that his missionary travels came to a halt. His life changed dramatically, and he faced death more than once. But here's the wonderful surprise. At the end of that joyful letter that he wrote from prison to the church in Philippi, we find these words:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. -Philippians 4:21-23

Yes, Paul didn't consider that his ministry had ended. He mentioned earlier that the imperial guard heard the gospel through him, and now he tells us that some in Caesar's own household have come to faith in Christ. Ok, if God wanted to get the gospel to the royal family of Rome, was there any better way? Yet, it was from the shame of the prison that the gospel went out, that the grace of God began to flow to those in the highest echelons of power in the empire. This is a characteristic of the gospel message. It brings life. That life cannot be shut out by putting it in prison. That's what we've been learning this first week of our Flourish study. Sunday, we learned about superblooms, as they are called. These are times when seeds that have been sitting dormant, sometimes for decades, spring to life in the desert. Vast hills and valleys are then blanketed with wildflowers. It is a beautiful sight to behold. This is the story of Paul in prison as we will learn later on in this letter. His prison experience becomes a teaching moment about the power of the gospel to change lives and renew relationships. This is the confidence we have in the gospel. It is the power of God for all who believe, whatever background they may be from. For Paul, his time in prison didn't end his life or ministry. Not even close. For us, we may pass through times like this. Perhaps not times when we are in prison, but times when we feel limited or restricted in our lives. Times when things are not working out as we planned. These are often the deserts where beautiful blooms come to grow, the prisons where we experience, even more deeply, our freedom in Christ.

Let us pray:

Lord God, we find it easy to complain about our circumstances. Show us how you are working wherever we may be. Remind us of the power of the gospel that can transform a prison into a sanctuary, and the desert into a flower show. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, September 16

Do you feel you know what God's will is for your life? This little letter of Colossians begins with the words:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God... -Colossians 1:1

Paul is telling his readers that he came by his job not by choice. He didn't come to the conclusion that the gospel was true and then decide he would become an apostle of Jesus. Instead, it was all God's doing. God confronted him with the truth of the gospel. God recruited him to be an apostle. I do not believe he would have chosen this calling. As we have learned, this was not an easy life. When people tell me that they are pursuing ministry, I do my best to discourage them. Or, a better way to put it is: I tell them that if this is not God's will for them, they should head another direction. But if it is God's will for them, then they should let nothing stand in their way. Here Paul tells of all he has gone through while serving:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. -2 Corinthians 11:24-28

He didn't sign up for this. His calling was just that, a calling. He became an apostle, not because he had anything to prove. Actually, he became an apostle when, for the first time in his life, he had nothing to prove. Nothing to earn. No record to keep. Paul lives by the will of God and ministers from the love of God. He doesn't carry out his ministry because he gets applause. It hasn't made him financially rich. He has laid everything aside to serve Christ. His is a ministry of suffering and sacrifice. It reflects the nature of the gospel itself. Now, think of how that freed Paul and also opened the way for the gospel. He wasn't seeking the approval of people. He never visited the church in Colossae. But he wanted to make sure they had what they would need to enjoy their new life in Christ. He feels a burden for everyone that comes to faith. Now, as we think about God's will in our lives, we have lost the language of vocation. The word, vocation, comes from the Latin word that means calling. In our world we have lost the language of calling, the idea that God has made us with a purpose and has a plan for our lives. This teaching is expressed in scripture in this way:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. -Ephesians 2:10

Yes, God made us with purpose and skill. His plan is for us to join him in his work in the world with the unique gifts and calling that he has provided to us. Just as God has given every person a unique set of fingerprints, God has a calling for each person. He made you with purpose, and his purpose is good works. Now, those words "good works" are code among the Jewish people for joining God in bringing life to our world. You do that as you exercise your vocation, your calling from God, using the abilities and passions and experience that God provided to you. This is what Paul is doing, and he also received a special call from God to serve as an apostle. For us, we have replaced the language of calling with the language of careers. The word, career, is related to the word careen, the term we use for flying along a road or path and going out of control. With this view of our lives, we are simply being moved along our lives by circumstances beyond our control. Taking this job. Leaving another. Flying along from one thing to another. This is really the opposite of purpose and calling and responding to God's will in your life. Now, this matters because if you are living out of your calling, you can weather difficulties and even face rejection. Paul does all of that as he is living from the will of God for his life. Of course, it is this truth that underlies all that Jesus does. He came to fulfill God's purpose, to bring life from his death. He is not deterred because he is living out of the will of God for him. That is a joy we can take, that we can know the calling of God, the will of God, and we can walk in it.

Let's pray:

Sovereign King, we do not want to be pushed along by circumstances. We want to be guided by you. Draw close to me, as I draw close to you, so that I might know what you have for me. Enable me to live from the calling you have provided to me. For I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Friday, September 17

Now the church in Colossae began when a young man named Epaphras returned home after time in Ephesus. In Ephesus, Epaphras had come into contact with the apostle Paul. Epaphras responded to the gospel and became a follower of Christ. Then when he returned home, he began to share the gospel with those around him. Soon enough, a church formed that was meeting at the home of a man named Philemon. Yes, that is the name of a book in the New Testament written by Paul to this leader in the church in Colossae. We'll be looking at how that happened much further on in our study. But for now, we need to recognize what happens when people come to faith in Christ. We can see this captured in the opening words of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, our text for today:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. -Colossians 1:3-5

Last Sunday, we looked briefly at the three core virtues of the gospel from these verses in Colossians. Here is how people become Christians. First, there is the virtue of faith that is

mentioned here. Paul says, *we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...* God works faith in us by the power of his Holy Spirit, enabling us to understand and to respond to the message of grace. You may hear it said that a person came to faith. But it is more like faith came to him. On our own, we would not be able to come to God. Therefore, God works faith in us. This faith is the engine for our lives in Christ. Now, believing in Jesus is more than a head knowledge, more than an assent to the truth of the gospel, more than accepting Jesus. It is coming to see the truth about ourselves and our sin and the truth about Jesus, who he is, why he came and what he came to do. Faith is seeing that Jesus did this for you. It is a willingness to rest in what Christ has done on your behalf. That faith looks more like a loyalty to Christ, a clinging to Christ for life.

Then we can see what Paul says comes next. There is a *love that you have for all the saints*. Love reveals that the person has come to faith in Jesus. As you come to trust in Jesus, your loves are reordered and turned outward. Jesus spoke about this with his disciples. He said to them on the night he was betrayed:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” -John 13:34-35

Later on in his life, the apostle explained how love indicates a real faith in Jesus. In his first letter to the church in Ephesus, John said:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. -1 John 3:14

He says if we want to know that a person believes, look at this love that naturally flows from faith. It is this unconditional love that flows from faith in Jesus. Paul has heard about this love at the fledgling church in Colossae. During this time, a famine was sweeping Palestine, and the believers there were in distress. Paul asked the churches to give in order to help their sisters and brothers in Jerusalem. The folks in Colossae stepped forward to support people they didn't know. Why did they do it? They believed the gospel, and their faith unleashed a new and powerful sacrificial love among the new believers.

The third of those Christian virtues, along with faith and love, is hope. Paul has heard they were focusing on *the hope laid up for you in heaven*. Yes, our faith in Jesus extends the horizon of our lives. We know, beyond the suffering and struggles we experience in life, we have an inheritance in the kingdom of God. The believers in Colossae learned they had a future that was secure in Christ. No earthly power could take it away. It could not be lost. Whatever might happen to them, they knew that one day they would be home with the Father. As King David said long ago, surely goodness and mercy will follow them all the days of their lives and then they shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Now, as we talk about faith, hope and love, we are talking about what sustains us when we come by faith to Christ. This is the life of faith. It is all God's gift. We do nothing to achieve it. We can only receive and rest in it. Think of the implications for us today. We come to God in the same way they did. We live by faith. We express the love that has been given to us. We rest in the hope of our future with God.

Let's pray:

Lord God, thank you for all that you give to us in Christ. We are humbled by your goodness, and we rejoice in the living faith that sustains us and gives us hope. Enable us, by your Spirit, to live in love for those around us, showing ourselves to be yours. With gratitude, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, September 18

For years, when someone asked me how they could pray for me, I would ask them to pray for my prayers, or better said, pray that I would be able to pray. Prayer has been one of my life-long

struggles. I've watched, for almost thirty years, an older pastor run the race of ministry. When I first met him, it struck me how few his prayers were, and how little he emphasized prayer. Through the years, I have seen an immense shift in his prayer life. He has become more and more dedicated to prayer. I believe this has happened because through a lifetime of ministry he has become more and more aware of his dependence on God. Now, the apostle Paul opens a window to his prayer life by often sharing his prayers with us. In this letter, he began with a prayer of gratitude to God for the gospel growth he sees across the world and in the church in Colossae. Then he turns his prayer toward requests for them:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...
-Colossians 1:9

Now as we see what Paul prays about, we notice that this is an on-going, unceasing prayer. He is not writing this in his letter for effect. This prayer has been his constant refrain to the Father on behalf of the church. The first focus of his prayer is for them to know the will of God. Now, we hear the word "know", and we think of knowledge and information. But Paul uses a special word here that means a knowledge that becomes certain through experience. This is how we come to know the will of God. And, knowing the will of God leads to wise decisions, decisions made in wisdom that open the way for a well-lived life. This knowledge comes through walking with God, coming to know who God is. Years ago, my first spiritual mentor was my pastor. His name was Bob Davis. He guided me as a young man through college and seminary and into ministry. Sadly, I lost his mentoring when he died fairly young. But years later, Sandy and I, when faced with a difficult situation, would ask: What would Bob do? We could ask this question because we knew Bob, knew him through experience. Having Bob's wisdom at our fingertips helped us through many trying moments when we weren't quite sure what to do. I think that is where we want to get with God. That is what should be behind the WWJD bracelet. What would Jesus do?

Now, this knowledge, this real knowing of someone and their will, comes only with time and relationship. I think this is what Paul is praying for the church in Colossae. He prays they will so walk with God, that they will come to know his will in their lives and in their church, providing them with spiritual wisdom and understanding. How could a pastor not want this the church?

Second, he prays for them to:

...be[ing] strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy... -Colossians 1:11

Yes, Paul knows that they might have knowledge of God's will, but then how will they live it? This little verse is pretty cool in Greek because Paul repeats the use of the same word for power or strength as if to say, powered with all power, or strengthened with all strength. He doesn't just want them to live the life God has for them. He prays that they will do this in God's power, not in their own. This means that our life in God is not something we give to God, as much as it is learning to live in such a way that the power of God is directed through you. It is not a life for God. It is a life with God. You say, what difference does this make? It makes all the difference in the world. Is your life a work you give to God, or is your life the place where you come to experience and know the power of God at work in you? Yes, that is what Paul prays for. One is a life of achieving. The other is a life of receiving grace and coming to know God's mighty power at work in you day after day.

Now, I want to return to my struggle with prayer. I think a turning point in my prayer came as I began to see that prayer was not something I had to do to gain God's favor or to get God to act in my life. No, prayer provides the opportunity for me to know and enjoy the Father who already loves me. I get to pray. I am privileged to come before the Father and enjoy fellowship with him, and come to see him working in my life and in the people that I love, the city that I love. Prayer is not an obligation, a burden. It is a gift. This too I enjoy with the power of God.

Now, as we are getting started this week, let's pray:

Lord God, show me that, in the gospel, the way has been opened for us to come boldly to you. We bring our prayer before you as children coming to our heavenly Father. Enable us to see you at work in our lives. Open the way for the knowledge of your will and provide your power to live the lives you call us to. In Jesus' name. Amen.