

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost • July 11, 2010**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

Colossians 1:1-14

“In Christ: Follow the Leader”

It's been a long time since I've played a game of “Follow the Leader.” It's been so long, in fact, that I had to go and look up the basic rules for the game. One person gets picked to be the leader, then all the other players line up behind him. The leader starts to move around, the line in tow, and the players have to mimic any actions that the leader performs. If they don't, they're eliminated from the game and removed from the line. The last player remaining in the line, the one that followed the leader the best, wins the game and becomes the new leader. Simple stuff, right? I suppose the answer to that question depends on which leader you end up following.

This weekend, we're moving into a new book of the Bible, St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. As we did with Galatians, we're going to explore this text each week to see how God's word through the apostle Paul speaks to us today, seeing how 1<sup>st</sup> Century and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians have more in common than you might expect. We are people who live “In Christ.”

In Paul's day, Colossae was located in a beautiful valley, about 100 miles east of the seaport of Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey. Paul had likely never been to Colossae, but the church there had probably gotten its start while he was working in Ephesus. Epaphras, whose name pops up in our reading today, was a man of some influence who'd likely been visiting Ephesus when he heard Paul preach, becoming a believer. Returning to Ephesus, he shared the Gospel with the people there, and through the working of the Holy Spirit, people in Colossae and a couple of other nearby towns became Christians. A few years later, Paul was being kept under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial, and Epaphras came to visit him with news that is both happy and troubling: a young church exists in Colossae, but it is in danger of being misled by false teaching. (Now if you're starting to recall the occasion of Paul's letter to the Galatians and thinking this all sounds familiar, you're not wrong!) We don't know the exact nature of this misleading influence beyond what Paul writes, but you'll hear more about the effect that it was having on the church there in the weeks ahead. The root of the problem, though, was that the Colossians were being led to believe that they had to follow mystical practices and understand secret things, even calling on angels for help and protection from evil spirits. Having heard this news from Epaphras, Paul writes this letter for him to take back the church in Colossae. The epistle of Colossians is, therefore, Paul's sincere encouragement to believers that we can follow Christ, our leader.

Colossians, more than almost any other book in the Bible, focuses on Christ. Who is Christ? What does “Christ” even mean? Contrary to what many people might think, it's not Jesus' last name! “Christ” is a title *and* a description. It's the Greek-language equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew word “Messiah.” They both mean “the Anointed” or “the Anointed One.” As the term's used in the Bible, it points to the one whom God would send to redeem the people: the Savior. That's why we call Jesus of Nazareth “Christ.” We Christians confess that Jesus is the Son of God, the One who saves us. So knowing that, let's look at why Paul directs the Colossians to Christ.

Imagine that you work in a company where you spent more time working through red tape than you do actually accomplishing anything. You've got several levels of bureaucracy between you and the big boss, so you need to direct your concerns to your superiors. If you're lucky, they might pass a request along to *their* superiors – and heaven help you if you need something from an entirely different department. And if you did, somehow, manage to gain an audience with your company's big boss, it's not like he would really care about you and your concerns, is it? And bureaucracy aside, you don't know how long you're going to get to keep your job. Every day, you come in with the fear that you're going to be let go, left high and dry. One day, though, you receive papers telling

you that you've been transferred to another company. You wonder what it might be like: new coworkers, new bureaucracy, new hoops through which you'll have to jump – that just how it goes. But when you arrive, the head honcho greets you at the door and welcomes you in. Seeing your shocked expression, he explains to you that there is no bureaucracy here, no red tape. You have direct access to this leader: any member of this company can come and speak with him whenever they need to, and he will hear them out. And job security? You can work in his company for as long as you'd like; it's his policy. You go in and look around, realizing that even the lighting is better here! Your old company was a dungeon in comparison! That's when you look down at your transfer papers again – mostly to make sure this is all real – and you notice the signature at the bottom of the document. Your new leader signed the transfer papers himself.

As he opens his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that God *“has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* The Greek words that Paul uses here for “delivered” and “transferred” give the sense of “rescued” and “handed over,” respectively. That's what Christ has done for the believers of Colossae, for everyone who is in Christ. He rescues us from lives that would otherwise be lived in darkness and fear. He sees to it that we are transferred, handed over, into his care. That's what happens in Baptism: Jesus signs the transfer papers and brings a new person into his company. He gives the believer a leader they can follow – and speak with directly– at any time.

In a way, we Christians can think about life as an extended version of “Follow the Leader.” We follow Christ. He is the model for how we are to live. Now, that's got a lot of implications, some of which we'll explore in the coming weeks. But I want to make something especially clear now. We don't follow Christ's example perfectly. Sometimes we get distracted. Sometimes we make mistakes and go off on our own way. And, honestly, it's impossible for us to follow Christ perfectly. We stumble and fall down many times each day. According to the rules of the game, we should be removed from the line, disqualified. But by God's grace, when we've seen that we haven't been following the leader, he welcomes us back in. Christ picks us up from the ground and dusts us off, inviting us to follow him once again. And so we follow. Christ teaches us his ways, that we may live lives worthy of the Lord. We keep practicing, knowing that our leader loves us, knowing that one day when our earthly life has come to a close, our following will be perfected.

Who is our leader? Who is this Christ we follow? Let's go with Paul through Colossians and find out!

Amen.