

Not Alone: How the Mission of the Church Moves Forward through Ordinary People

Colossians 4:7-18

May 31st, 2020

Big idea: The concluding greetings model a relational team approach to life and ministry that we should follow as well.

Intro –

In Central Park in New York is a statue of Balto, a sled dog who was part of the original Iditarod to carry medicine 1,000 miles to Nome, Alaska in 1926. He was made famous through news accounts at the time and later through a series of movies named after him in the 1990's. Last year an updated movie came out about the original incident that showed how many dogs and dogsledders were involved, not just Balto. Great events of history are often like that. One person (or dog) is more prominent but many, many others were involved and without their participation the great achievements could not have happened.

That's the way it was with the spread of the gospel in the 1st century. There are critical, "big name" people like Paul and Peter, but there are so many other "ordinary" people who played critical roles. The ending of Colossians reminds us of this and reminds us about how the whole body is involved in the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Many of the New Testament books are called epistles, meaning they were letters written to churches (like Colossians or Ephesians), individuals (like Titus or Philemon), or all believers in a community (Romans or Galatians). No where is that more evident than in the closing of the letters. Although there are great nuggets of doctrine even in the closing comments, what really stands out is the amount of cooperation and teamwork that happens in the early church. One author described it like a verbal group photograph. Ten people are mentioned.

That's a model for us as well. The body takes many parts to function.

The past few months has helped me to appreciate the wide variety of gifts and abilities in the body. Samuel Larkin has spent hours every weekend recording, editing, and uploading services. Andrew Lovelace has researched options, set up technology, shown up for recordings. Dave Turnmire has researched and worked on upgrading our internet speed.

And if the relationships among those parts is severed, the body suffers and the work of the kingdom suffers as well, and yet reconciliation is possible.

1. Two faithful couriers carried a **message**. (4:7-9)
 - a. The first two people mentioned played a valuable role in the day before a postal system could carry important messages.
 - i. Tychicus and Onesimus carried Paul's letter to the Colossians, as well as the letters of Philemon and Ephesians.
 - ii. Remember, Paul was in prison, most likely in Rome as recorded at the end of Acts.
 - b. Tychicus was a valuable part of the ministry team.
 - i. Tychicus was with Paul in Acts 20.
 - ii. He may have been sent by Paul to replace Titus in Crete.
 1. **Titus 3:12** When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, make every effort to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there.
 - iii. He was sent by Paul to Ephesus
 1. **2 Timothy 4:12** But Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.
 - iv. He was described in Colossians as a "beloved brother, faithful servant, and fellow bond-servant."

- c. Onesimus apparently was a run away slave who came to Christ after meeting Paul.
 - i. **Philemon 1:10-12** I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,¹¹ who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.¹² I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart,
 - ii. **Philemon 1:15-18** For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever,¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.¹⁷ If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.¹⁸ But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;
 - iii. His slavery was likely what we would consider an indentured servitude, in which someone contracts for a period of time to work for someone as a slave and then is freed. The majority of slaves in the Roman empire were freed by the age of 30.
 - 1. In the historical context, running away for him was less like a slave in the American south escaping through the underground railroad and more like someone contracting to do a job and leaving with the money.
 - 2. That's why Paul would say to Philemon, "if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account." (Philemon 1:18)
 - d. But they were more than mere letter carriers. They would give an update about Paul and minister to the people. They had a two-fold purpose: to inform and to encourage.
 - i. It was a missionary update by an old-school method
 - 1. One of the best ways to care for missionaries is to simply stay updated – what's going on in their lives? What has been hard? What encouraging things have they seen? How can you pray? Many of our missionaries send regular updates via email. Sign up when they are here, even if you don't financially support them, or contact our church secretary to get signed up.
2. Six fellow workers sent their ***greetings*** and labored from a distance. (4:10-14)
- a. Aristarchus was with Paul in Acts 19 when there was a riot in Ephesus and in Acts 27 as Paul was being transferred by boat to Rome.
 - b. We know more about Mark, sometimes called John, but not everything reflects well on him.
 - i. His mother was involved in the early church
 - 1. **Act 12:12** And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.
 - ii. He went with Paul and Barnabas on an early missionary journey but deserted them part way through. He wanted to come along later but Paul refused, leading to a division with Barnabas.
 - 1. **Acts 15:37-40** Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also.³⁸ But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.³⁹ And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.
 - 2. That was probably 12 years earlier. In the meantime, there was apparently a reconciliation. He was with Paul in Rome and may come to the Colossians.
 - 3. In Paul's last letter, Mark is described as "useful to me for service."

- a. **2 Timothy 4:11** Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.
- 4. What occurred in the meantime to promote reconciliation? What changed in Mark? Paul? We're not told, but the little glimpse we see is encouraging.
- c. This is all we know about Justus.
 - i. I wondered if he changed his name for obvious reasons, but it was actually common for 1st century Jews to take a second Greek or Roman name that sounded similar to their Jewish name, much like we get to know many international students as "Mario" or "John" when their real names are something different.
- d. These three are described as Paul's only fellow workers who are Jewish. The next three are Greeks: Epaphras, Luke, Demas.
- e. Epaphras was probably the one who planted the church in Colossae and brought concerns about the church to Paul.
 - i. **Colossians 1:7-8** just as you learned *it* from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.
 - ii. Epaphras was known as laboring for them in his prayers while away.
 - 1. His prayer was for them to stand perfect (mature) and fully assured in the will of God.
 - 2. He is praying for spiritual maturity.
 - 3. What a valuable ministry it is to labor in prayer for others.
- f. Luke wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, 25% of the NT by volume.
 - i. Much of Acts is written as "we," showing that Luke was often with Paul on his journeys.
- g. Demas is a sad warning in this list.
 - i. We only know he was with Paul at the writing of Colossians and Philemon but by the writing of 2 Timothy, Paul says:
 - ii. **2 Timothy 4:10a** for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica;
 - iii. What does it mean that he loved this present world?
 - 1. He wasn't willing to endure this suffering for the gospel with Paul. He was a "fair-weather disciple." Besides fear of suffering, he may also have departed because he entangled himself with the affairs of this world and was diverted from the high call of ministry. It could be money or pleasure that pulled him away.
 - 2. **2 Timothy 2:4** No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.
 - iv. Present faithfulness doesn't guarantee future faithfulness.
- 3. One hospitable woman hosted a **church** (4:15)
 - a. Only a quick note here that a woman named Nympha hosted a church in her house.
 - b. Like Lydia in Acts who used her home to bless others
 - i. **Acts 16:14-15** A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you

have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

- ii. **Acts 16:40** They went out of the prison and entered *the house of Lydia*, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.
- c. There is a rich and vital ministry in hospitality, even if hospitality has been hindered right now!
 - i. Providing space for people to gather, welcoming their disruption into your routine, gladly taking on the cleaning before and after.
 - ii. **Romans 12:12-13** rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³ contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.
 - iii. Of course there are other ways women can be involved in the mission of the church to make disciples, but we shouldn't downplay this way.
- 4. Five quick concluding statements (4:16-18)
 - a. They are to exchange letters with the church in Laodicea, a neighboring community about 20 miles away.
 - i. These letters that make up the NT were circulated in the early churches. The letter to Laodicea is possibly referring to the book of Ephesians as it was circulated among the communities. Ephesus was about 100 miles away. It's also possible it was a separate letter that is now lost to us. We know there were other letters Paul wrote that he refers to but we don't have, such as a previous letter to the Corinthians.
 - b. A personal charge to Archippus to fulfill his ministry.
 - i. A reminder to us to press on through hardship if we take on a ministry task.
 - ii. **2 Timothy 4:5** But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.
 - c. A statement to affirm the authenticity of the letter – Paul wrote this greeting with his own hand.
 - i. A person called an amanuensis often wrote the letter as a person dictated it.
 - 1. **Romans 16:22** I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord.
 - 2. This is to preserve space on valuable material and make it more readable.
 - 3. I could use an amanuensis. I was told in high school that my writing looks like ancient Hebrew. It wasn't a compliment!
 - ii. Paul wrote a greeting in his own hand to authenticate it.
 - 1. **2 Thessalonians 3:17** I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.
 - d. Remember my imprisonment
 - i. Likely a prayer request. We often forget those who suffer long term – whether from persecution or a long-term illness. There's a flurry of activity and concern and then our attention wanes.
 - e. Grace be with you.
 - i. Customary conclusion – reminding his readers that they live and breathe grace every day. We have been given commands in this letter but they aren't weights on our back. The gospel of grace is the air we breathe, the commands are the overflow from the life of Christ at work within us.
- 5. Applying truth to life

- a. **Failure** doesn't need to be the end of the story.
 - i. Onesimus ran away, likely breaking his contract.
 - 1. This was a failure before he came to Christ.
 - ii. Mark bailed on the mission early.
 - 1. This was a failure after he came to Christ, apparently.
 - iii. That wasn't the end of the story for either of them though.
 - 1. Onesimus met Paul, came to Christ, and was returning as a brother.
 - 2. Mark went on to be useful to the cause of Christ.
 - iv. You may have messed up big time before you came to Christ. You may have messed up and let people down after you came to Christ. Neither needs to end the story. Seek reconciliation if needed, confess, move forward.
- b. There is great value in **small** things done for Christ.
 - i. Variety of service hinted at in the little bit we see here
 - 1. Carrying a letter
 - 2. Hosting a church
 - 3. Laboring in prayer
 - ii. Instead of lamenting about what you aren't able to do for Christ because you lack certain gifts, abilities, training, or time, focus on what you can do for Christ, however small it may seem. 100 people doing "small things" for Christ in a body makes a vibrant church family.
 - 1. Take someone a meal, clean after a service, open a door, ask what you can pray for and then pray for someone
- c. **Small** things done for Christ are eternal.
 - i. The short letter Tychicus carried would outlast the Roman empire. A church in Idaho 20 centuries later would read it.
 - ii. Who knows how the Lord may use the time spent teaching kids in Sunday school, organizing meals for people, contributing to someone when they are knocked down.
- d. Work for ongoing **reconciliation**.
 - i. Onesimus and Philemon and Paul and Mark
 - ii. How easy it would have been for Philemon to write off Onesimus and want nothing to do with him. Same for Paul and Mark.
 - iii. Likewise, it's easy when someone hurts you, disappoints you or just disagrees with you to simply cut ties. It's possibly even easier now with social distancing and online options. You can retreat into the shadows, disengage, and people may not notice. Or you can move your mouse over to another website and stream another service.
 - 1. But I encourage you, do the hard work to stick with relationships – to confront, forgive, be reconciled, and endure.
 - 2. I love that our church has families that have been with UBC for 40 years. What will it take for you to be here 40 years from now? What personal offenses will you need to overlook? What forgiveness will you need to extend? What period of "boredom" will

you need to work through rather than looking for greener grass? What annoying mannerisms in the pastor will you need to put up with?



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