

A Fore-Edge Life
Colossians 1:1-14
July 14, 2019

As we begin, this is an audience participation sermon. When I say the words, “Church, you are in Christ.” Your response is: **May our beauty show.**

Turn to the picture on the front of your bulletin. I know it is difficult to see what it is. What you are looking at is an example of an obscure art form called fore-edge painting. It is a scene painted on the fore-edges of gold leaf pages in a book.

When the book is closed, you don’t see the image because it is hidden by the gold leaf on the pages. When the book is spread open or the pages are fanned or ruffled, the beautiful artwork appears. Close the book and the artwork disappears. (You can go on Youtube and watch videos of it.) Someone said it is like discovering magic on a book before you even read its opening lines.

The point is this: The book must be ruffled and disturbed in order to see the artwork, otherwise the beauty remains hidden. This is sort of like our lives. There is beauty in our lives that is often not seen until we are ruffled and disturbed.

And, this beauty is what the Apostle Paul calls being in Christ. We are in Christ.

Church, you are in Christ. **May our beauty show.**

This phrase “in Christ” is used more than 170 times in the New Testament. Paul begins his letter to the Colossian Christians in verse 2: To God’s holy people in Colossae (ca la’ see), the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

What does this mean to be “in Christ?”

There are various ways to talk about the “ins” of life:

“In” can describe our welfare: We are in love, in pain, in good health, in dire straits.

“In” can be about our geographic location: We are in Green Valley. Many of our church people are right now in Michigan.

“In” can relate to an institution or organization: We may be in school, in church, in the hospital.

“In” can tell what occupation we are in: We may be in the army, in “ministry”, in teaching, in banking.

All of these “ins” tell us a bit about who we are. They give us information about our state of being, about our self, our location.

When we are in Christ, it gives information about our state of being, about our self, and to whom we belong to. The phrase refers to being in a certain position or relationship with Jesus. “In Christ” means we are bound to Christ in a profound way. Because we are in Christ, we have a hidden beauty.

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Here is what that beauty in Christ is:

From 2 Timothy 1:9 God gave us grace in Christ

From Ephesians 1:4 God chose us in Christ

From Romans 8:38-39 Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ

From Ephesians 1:7 In Christ we have forgiveness of sin

From 2 Corinthians 5:21, in Christ we are right before God

From 2 Corinthians 5:17 In Christ we are a new creation

From Galatians 3:26 in Christ we are sons and daughters of God.

This is the state of our being in Christ – forgiven, chosen, grace-filled children of God. It’s a beautiful life. God is continually creating beautiful artwork in our lives that often remains hidden.

But something has happened in this church in Colosse. Paul tells them that he has noticed their faith. Mind you, Paul has never met these Christians, but he has heard about them. He says, “We have heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.” When the book of their lives was opened, a beautiful picture appeared of being in Christ.

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Remember, being in Christ means we are chosen, forgiven, loved, children of God. It is beautiful, but what is that supposed to look like in our lives? Paul says this: Because you are in Christ, live a life worthy of being in Christ (verse 10). In other words, live a life worthy of that beauty within you.

We live a fore-edge life in Christ. You are beautiful on the inside because of what Christ has done, but we are called to live in such a way that the beauty comes out in the nitty-gritty of life. For example, when you're in conversation with someone you love and a disagreement arises. Is your response something beautiful? Is it worthy of being in Christ? If we have been forgiven, chosen, loved, then isn't that beauty worth living out in our lives and giving to others?

What does it look to live a life worthy of being in Christ?

A life in Christ bears fruit, Paul says.

Ah, there's that topic again! I spoke about fruit several weeks ago....the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, goodness, self-control. A life in Christ has great endurance and patience and joy, Paul says. This beauty comes out when we interact with people. Bear fruit in every good work, Paul says.

Do we bear fruit in every good work? What's revealed in *your* life when something or someone *ruffles your pages*? Or, when the book of your life is opened?

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Often, a church will lose its way. One such small town church closed. What the farmers of the community missed was the ringing of the church bells, not the ministries of the church, not the people. Apparently that church served no other role in their community than that of music-maker. It was their only fruit.

As Paul begins his letter to the church in Colosse, he begins by praising the church. It has earned a reputation as the kind of place that bore good fruit: "Just as [the gospel] is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it." This church is producing fruit in Christ. It is living a life worthy of Christ.

I pray this for our church, that the beauty in our pages will be seen. I pray that our ministries are making a difference to our neighbors. I pray that the Spirit working through us is changing lives, deepening faith, seeding hope in our neighborhood. That if our church disappeared tomorrow, the community will miss us not because we have great concerts here or that our bells ring on the hour, but because the presence of our church community made our neighborhood community better and healthier and more faithful, and drew people to God.

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Now all of this sounds like we have to be doing spectacular things for God (I mean, God has done spectacular things for us, so why not!). We are called to bear fruit, do good deeds, grow in our knowledge of God, be patient, be joyful. To do these things is to live a life worthy in Christ. If you think about it, these are pretty mundane things.

It is when we are engaged in the most mundane activities that we make the most difference in another person's life. It is through the quality of our character that we make a difference in another life. It is through the way in which we conduct our relationships that we really have an effect on another human being. The Christian life is simply a matter of living out the grace and mercy and compassion of God in Christ....your beauty in Christ showing through to others.

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I end with a story someone shared with me several years ago, and I've never forgotten it. It is a story about letting the beauty of being in Christ show through us in a mundane way. This true story is by Beth Moore, a popular author and Bible teacher.

She is sitting in the Knoxville airport waiting to board her plane. She begins her story with these words... "it is a scary thing to have the Spirit of God really working in you." She sees a man in a wheelchair. He is very skinny, dressed in clothes too big for him. He has long messy, stringy grey hair that extends down to his back. Long fingernails. She can't help staring at him. I now turn to her words....

I had walked with God long enough to see the handwriting on the wall... I immediately began to resist because I could feel God working on my spirit and I started arguing with God in my mind. "Oh no, God please no." I looked up at the ceiling as if I could stare straight through it into heaven and said, "Don't make me witness to this man. Not right here and now. Please. I'll do anything. Put me on the same plane, but don't make me get up here and witness to this man in front of this gawking audience. Please, Lord!"... Then I heard it..."I don't want you to witness to him. I want you to brush his hair."

The words were so clear, my heart leapt into my throat, and my thoughts spun like a top. Do I witness to the man or brush his hair? No brainer. I looked straight back up at the ceiling and said, "God, as I live and breathe, I want you to know I am ready to witness to this man. I'm on this Lord. I'm your girl! You've never seen a woman witness to a man faster in your life. What difference does it make if his hair is a mess if he is not redeemed? I am on him. I am going to witness to this man."

Again as clearly as I've ever heard an audible word, God seemed to write this statement across the wall of my mind. "That is not what I said, Beth. I don't want you to witness to him. I want you to go brush his hair."

...I knelt down in front of the man, and asked as demurely as possible, "Sir, may I have the pleasure of brushing your hair?"

He looked back at me and said, "What did you say?"

"May I have the pleasure of brushing your hair?"

To which he responded in volume ten, "Little lady, if you expect me to hear you, you're going to have to talk louder than that."

At this point, I took a deep breath and blurted out, "SIR, MAY I HAVE THE PLEASURE OF BRUSHING YOUR HAIR?" At which point every eye in the place darted right at me. I was the only thing in the room looking more peculiar than old Mr. Longlocks. Face crimson and forehead breaking out in a sweat.

I watched him look up at me with absolute shock on his face, and say, "If you really want to." Are you kidding? Of course I didn't want to. But God didn't seem interested in my personal preference right about then. He pressed on my heart until I could utter the words, "Yes, sir, I would be pleased. But I have one little problem. I don't have a hairbrush."

"I have one in my bag," he responded.

I went around to the back of that wheelchair, and I got on my hands and knees and unzipped the stranger's old carry-on hardly believing what I was doing. I stood up and started brushing the old man's hair...

A miraculous thing happened to me as I started brushing that old man's hair.... Everybody else in the room disappeared. There was no one alive for those moments except that old man and me. I brushed and brushed and I brushed until every tangle was out of that hair. I know this sounds so strange but I've never felt that kind of love for another soul in my entire life. I believe with all my heart, I—for that few minutes—felt a portion of the very love of God....

His hair was finally as soft and smooth as an infant's. I slipped the brush back in the bag, went around the chair to face him. I got back down on my knees, put my hands on his knees, and said, "Sir, do you know my Jesus?"

He said, "Yes, I do." Well, that figures.

He explained, "I've known Him since I married my bride. She wouldn't marry me until I got to know the Savior." He said "You see, the problem is, I haven't seen my bride in months. I've had open-heart surgery, and she's been too ill to come see me. I was sitting here thinking to myself what a mess I must be for my bride."

Only God knows how often He allows us to be part of a divine moment when we're completely unaware of the significance. This, on the other hand, was one of those rare encounters when I knew God had intervened in details only He could have known. It was a God moment, and I'll never forget it.

I still had a few minutes, and as I gathered my things to board, the airline hostess returned from the corridor, tears streaming down her cheeks. She said, "That old man's sitting on the plane, sobbing. Why did you do that? What made you do that?"

I said, "Do you know Jesus? He can be the bossiest thing!"

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Amen.

So let stand and affirm together the beauty that within us by saying The Apostle's Creed found on page 14 in your hymnal. We will do the traditional version.