

Firstborn of the Heart  
Colossians 1:15-23  
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Sometimes it just doesn't add up. Sometimes you have all the facts laid out there in front of you and they just won't come to a solution. Sometimes the facts seem contrary, even when you have it on good authority that they are accurate. Sometimes having all the knowledge in the world still won't solve a problem, because some problems are greater even than knowledge. Some problems require faith to untangle.

Be that as it may, we are still kind of stuck on knowledge as the key to our lives. Indeed, knowledge is quickly becoming the key to our civilization. Don't get me wrong; knowledge is good. It makes our lives easier and easier. It enables me to receive e-mail from my 90 year old grandmother in Washington state. It enables us to see pictures of rocks on Mars. It enables us to enjoy the Sunday paper from our hometown, no matter where we are in the world.

Knowledge *is* power, right, that's what we learn in school. It's the information age, time to log onto the information superhighway. It is not enough anymore to have a high school diploma. It isn't enough now to have a bachelor's degree. And soon our Master's degrees won't be enough schooling to assure us of a job. We are an information-based economy now, and only greater and greater amounts of knowledge and new ways to manipulate it will keep us on top, ahead of whatever competition lurks across the ocean. Information and technology keep

doubling in a shorter and shorter period of time. When we first started calculating how long it took for the total accumulated amount that we as a species knew to double, it was about 50 years. Just a few years after that, it only took 20 years for that knowledge to double. And then ten and five and now we are probably closing in on knowledge doubling every two or three years. Think of it: everything we now know; in about three years, we'll know twice as much. Sometimes I think the pursuit of knowledge has become its own sort of religion, and we make it so because we need to think we have all the answers. No one likes to go around thinking they are wrong. Having the answers, being certain of what we think, gaining knowledge, all this is very comforting because it helps us to maintain our balance in a world full of questions we really can't answer.

Paul's message to the Colossians which we just heard has some knowledge and some answers. In fact, it was probably written to counteract false teaching and the dissemination of bad information about Christ. It seems that a heresy of sorts had popped up in the church at Colossae with people teaching that angels were responsible for intercession and that Christ was subservient to intermediary powers and this sort of thing. Paul sets the record straight with the knowledge they needed to know about Christ. "Christ is the firstborn of creation. In him all is created, he holds things together, he is the firstborn from the dead, in him the fullness of God dwells." It was a battle against intruding philosophies and Paul has the last word: Christ is the Christ of the Cosmos, of all creation. In fact, Paul puts his

explanations in such terms that all the big questions about Christ seem to be answered. It is as if he could sit back smugly say, “Any More Questions?” because the description is so complete.

But Paul recognizes that mere knowledge is not enough. It takes faith to make the gospel come alive, faith to make Christ real in people’s lives. He says, you are reconciled from your estrangement and hostility and evil doing, “provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard.” He doesn’t say that you are reconciled provided you know these things about Christ. Rather, the reconciliation is based on faith and hope.

I think Paul sees that knowledge and information and systems of human philosophy can be stumbling blocks to making Jesus our own, that they give us a false sense of security, that they prevent us from asking the really tough questions. Pursuing knowledge and debating larger issues makes it easier to avoid asking the probing personal and ethical questions that Christ calls us to ask ourselves. Talking about angels and about who answers to whom in the heavenly realm is fruitless and distracting from the joy of following Christ. When Paul tells the Colossians that Christ’s death makes possible their reconciliation with God provided they maintain faith and hope, I read him to say, “Yes, Christ is the firstborn of creation, Yes, Christ is the firstborn of the dead, Yes, Christ is all these things you know, but: Christ must be the firstborn of your *heart, as well as your head.*” In so many

words, he brings his readers down to earth from their flight of fancy about the hierarchy of heaven and reminds them of the need for Christ in their lives. Christ must be the firstborn of your heart, as well as your head.

We can understand when Paul calls Christ the firstborn of creation as Christ's preexistent role in the making of heaven and earth and we can understand the idea of the firstborn of the dead as the resurrection of Jesus, but what does it really mean to say Christ is the firstborn of the heart? There are many dimensions to Christ being firstborn of the heart. It is not just a question of salvation. I think if God were only interested in our salvation, the instrument of that salvation would have been a lot more mundane than Jesus. No, God is interested in our lives on earth as well and how we interact with others. That is why Christ is, as Paul says in the opening verse of today's passage, "the image of the invisible God." Christ's presence on earth allows us to see not only God, but also the life that God envisions for all creation. And just as Christ was firstborn of creation and of the dead, Christ is the firstborn of God's heart and must be the firstborn of our hearts if we are to come close to living the abundant life proclaimed by the gospel.

Perhaps the world's most famous monk, Thomas Merton, recounts in his autobiography his steps towards becoming a Trappist monk at the monastery at Gethsemani and I think it is really a retelling of how Christ became firstborn in the heart of young man who had resisted God for so long. I want to read you a portion of it because I think it captures something of what I'm talking about. He is on his

way for the first time to the monastery in Kentucky, passing through Cincinnati on a train. He writes,

So when we entered Cincinnati, in the evening, with the lights coming on among all the houses and the electric signs shining on the hills, and the huge freight yards swinging open on either side of the track and the high buildings in the distance, I felt as if I owned the world. And yet that was not because of all these things, but because of Gethsemani, where I was going. It was the fact that I was passing through all this, and did not desire it, and wanted no part in it, and did not seek to grasp or hold any of it, that I could exult in it, and it all cried out to me: God! God!

All of Merton's growing up years, he could not let go of the pleasures of life and finally, and he is passing through their midst, literally, and he no longer wants them. Christ, rather than the desires of his heart, is firstborn. Although it is not, Merton's description of his joy sounds an awful lot like a mountaintop experience, one of the spiritual peaks in a person's life so powerful that without the proper perspective, one can spend all of one's life looking to repeat at the expense of a meaningful relationship with God. Making Christ the firstborn of your heart is more than a mountaintop experience. It is a way of life, perhaps even Christ's very own way of life, a way of life Merton finally embraced.

Now, we are not all as eloquent as Thomas Merton nor do we all need to become Trappists in order to have this attitude. The place of Christ in our hearts is

reflected in the way we lead our lives. I remember very distinctly the opening of the movie, "The Milagro Beanfield War," truly one of my favorite films of all time. Old Señor Amante in his tiny, little, dusty adobe house in New Mexico with only shutters to cover the opening where glass would normally be, rises as the sun shines through those shutters into his eyes. He creaks out of bed and strokes his beard and shuffles over to a mirror, looks closely at himself and says, "Thank you, God, for giving me one more day." He says it almost routinely, but not in the negative sense of routine, but more that he was thankful everyday. I think there is no more profound expression of faith than to offer this simple sort of gratitude. This man had not moved mountains nor built a business nor formulated a philosophy. But he humbled himself before God and let Christ be firstborn in his heart.

Maybe you are familiar with the story of a certain Quaker man, John Woolman, who lived in New Jersey in the middle of the eighteenth century, making his living as a clerk in a drygoods store. One day he found himself being requested to write a bill of sale for one of his employer's slaves. He couldn't do it: his hand wouldn't move but his mouth could and he found himself saying, "I believe slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion." And though this was his first moral thought and act in response to the inhumanity of slavery, it was not his last. Despite holding several jobs to support his family, he was also a preacher and took several months a year to travel around preaching

against slavery. He influenced many people to become abolitionists but his commitment didn't end there. He stopped using sugar because it was produced by slaves. He stopped wearing colored clothing because slaves produced the dye. He called blacks brother and sister. His life became a humble instrument to bring justice to an unjust order. He was considered eccentric and foolish and a bit odd but to the last, he gave glory to God for his passion. As he lay dying of smallpox in England where he had gone to speak out against slavery to the Quakers in England, he wrote, just hours before he died, "I believe my being here is in the wisdom of Christ." His life says to me that his being there was because he allowed Christ to be firstborn in his heart.

In the Bible, we read of Christ talking about abundant life. God gives life, there's no doubt about that, but what constitutes abundant life? We can exist without experiencing God, people do it everyday. That doesn't mean that God is not with us. God is always there, inescapably there. But I think the difference between mere life and abundant life is this: When we recognize and embrace God in our life, it becomes abundant. It overflows with joy at our creation, compassion for people crushed by the world, a craving for justice and a longing for peace. Our life becomes an expression of God in our daily tasks as well as our heroic moments of faith. It makes life difficult but dynamic, perplexing yet poignant, and sometimes messy but always meaningful.

You can do all the research you want on this abundant life. You can read all the Wikipedia entries on the subject. You can channel surf all day, every day looking for it. But you'll never be able to ingest enough information to make it real on that basis alone. You can be the world's foremost expert on what Paul means when he says, "He is the image of the invisible God; the firstborn of all creation." But you won't really know anything until you experience Christ as the firstborn of your heart, and "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel you heard." May God help us to experience that abundant life in Jesus Christ. Amen.