

“Put Me In For A Transfer”

Colossians 1:1-2, 9b-20

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I hope all of you have had the chance to see the television show M*A*S*H, a very funny comedy about a very serious subject, set at an Army field hospital in Korea during the Korean War. Perhaps you will remember the character of Corporal Klinger who would go to any length to be discharged from the army. Unable to obtain a transfer stateside by traditional means, Clinger spent his time pursuing the infamous “Section 8” discharge, trying to convince his superiors at his Army hospital that he was insane and should be sent home. So he would show up in each episode wearing the craziest outfits and plotting the wildest schemes trying to get a discharge. Who could blame him? After all, war is hell. What we could all see about Clinger, and the thing he would finally learn about himself, was that the 4077th was just where he belonged - for himself and for those with whom he lived and worked and served. Whether he knew it or not, and whether he liked it or not, Clinger had already received the papers designating him where he was *really* supposed to be. A power higher and wiser than he had already taken care of that.

These days, a lot of people seem to be seeking a transfer in one form or another. Some have been saying “Put me in for a transfer” following elections in their countries, unhappy with the results. Some have been saying “Put me in for a transfer” in response to the removal of the Ten Commandments from this or that

public place, put out by what seems like a contribution to the lawlessness of their society. Some have been saying “Put me in for a transfer” as they watch the direction of the war, discouraged that violence was not the last resort and despairing over the continuing loss of innocent life. Some have been saying “Put me in for a transfer” after “under God” was removed from the Pledge of Allegiance in the United States, worried that future generations will forget our maker’s role in making our nation. There is always something to get hot about, isn’t there? And while some feel that the grass is greener somewhere down memory lane, others think that utopia lies as far as possible in the opposite direction from nostalgia. Can we never be content with just where we are? Have we yet to learn, like Clinger, that where we are right now is just where God wants us to be, that like Clinger, our transfer papers have already been signed and that’s how we got where we are? And that maybe, just maybe, where we are, and more importantly, what we choose to do while we are there, has, or can have, a profound affect on life in the Kingdom?

Some in the early church in Colossae were apparently seeking, or close to seeking, a transfer. Where once they had possessed a solid grounding in Jesus Christ, competing world views had begun to make inroads into the church, and the letter which we know as Colossians does its best to refute and rebut the claims of those who would deny the unique ability of Christ to put us in union with God. Maybe the pressures of living a Christian life among pagan neighbors was

beginning to wear on some. Maybe fear of persecution from the Emperor had some questioning the wisdom of following this Jesus guy. Maybe there were wolves in sheep's clothing trying to pick off the weak and unsuspecting of the flock.

Whatever the underlying reasons, certain members in the Colossian church were willing to entertain the notion that there was satisfaction to be found outside the body of Christ. The specifics of the competing philosophy are lost in the mists of time, but it is clear that for Paul, there can be no doubt that Jesus Christ demands an absolute allegiance, a case Paul makes when he describes Christ as both the very agent *and* goal of creation.

It is not hard to understand why this passage is on the Lectionary's slate for Christ the King Sunday, what with Paul's proclamation that the believers have been transferred into the Kingdom of God's beloved son, and the description of Christ as the firstborn of all creation, in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created. There's no topping that. The King is the one with all the power, all the ability to rescue and protect, and all the responsibility to provide for the welfare of the people, themes to which Paul appeals in our passage this morning. Listen again to how he characterizes what God through Christ has done for the saints: "We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong

with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Who else but a King, and who else but God?

In reading these lines and what lies between them, we can see that what Paul is trying to say is that it doesn't get any better than this, that no other religious system is going to be more satisfactory; all other schemes are inferior compared to what we have in God through Jesus Christ. And so, he is saying, if you feel like something in your life or faith are lacking, don't look elsewhere, but rather seek it where there is real depth, where it really can be found. Seeking elsewhere, trying to transfer out, will only lead you into subjugation to “the power of darkness,” a euphemism for evil and chaos. The impulse to seek a transfer from those things in our lives or our world which trouble us is strong, but in the end fruitless because our God is the only god who can provide the satisfaction we seek as human beings, the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally, love demonstrated on the cross.

This is not to say that we endure hardship without question, that we persist in destructive situations out of some over-developed sense of self-sacrifice. Sometimes we do need to relocate ourselves and our families to follow faithfully God's call to wholeness and purpose. It is those times in which we can see that

sometimes the journey itself from point A to point B is just where we need to be. More often than not, however, more often than not, a physical relocation, or a shakeup of the shape of our lives is just a way of transferring our sense of unease to wherever we end up, instead of resolving it and recognizing that we are already where God wants us to be. You see, the transfers we usually seek aren't ones for which you can buy a ticket. The transfers we seek are from things like a sense of overwhelming responsibility, from uncertainty and ambiguity, from fear, from our past or our present or our future, from our health, all things which are going to follow us and dog us from time to time no matter how far we go. And so instead of being in the "kingdom of the beloved son" trying to come to terms with that from which we'd like to escape, if we are successful in seeking our transfer, it will be to a place from which our escape will be ultimately be futile.

Clinger may have wanted to go back to the good, old U.S. of A., but the places to which we human beings usually seek our transfers are places and states a little less tangible, like spiritual numbness, like addiction, like high adventure. They are places where we live our lives in a fantasy, or in denial, or under lock and key, trapped behind emotional or even physical bars and gates for fear for our lives, or staring at a computer screen engaged only in virtual, less threatening relationships. They are lives lived in the perpetual search for a spiritual mountaintop or enlightening guru. They are lives which have not yet learned, or perhaps fully embraced the truth taught us by St. Augustine who confessed to his

God that “You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” Our restlessness, our desire for a transfer, will follow us wherever we go trying to outrun it.

I want to tell you the story of someone who figured that out, who figured out that where he was was just where he was supposed to be. The story comes from the 23rd chapter of the Gospel of Luke, in one of our other Lectionary passages for the evening. Listen now to the Word of God: “When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left...One of the criminals who were hanging there kept deriding Jesus and saying ‘Are you not the Messiah’ Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’ ”

If you think I was referring to Jesus as the person who knew that he was where he was supposed to be, you’d only be half-right. You see, in this story, I think it was the thief who figured out that he had already been transferred into the kingdom of the beloved son and that despite being in the most painful and heartbreaking place on earth, didn’t need a ticket anywhere else because he was already in paradise. Paradise, you say? Hanging on a cross? Well, it was on a cross

that God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood” of Jesus on his cross. The thief on the cross was in the right place at the right time, in a place from which he was in a position to see what no one else could see. He is the only one in all the gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion who actually “got it” while it was happening, instead of needing an earthquake, or a torn curtain in the temple, or a few days of reflection. Everybody else was so overcome with their grief or their disappointment that they were looking for a transfer out instead of living in the moment and seeing God’s glory. Only the thief could see the truth through the mocking, that Jesus was not just the king of the Jews but of all creation, and that he himself, an unrighteous sinner who deserved his punishment, already belonged in the realm, that he was already experiencing paradise.

Friends, wherever you are is paradise, if you see what the thief saw, if you plead like the thief plead. The cosmic description of Christ in Colossians speaks to the ability of Christ to transcend geography, physical or spiritual, and thus make paradise exist wherever we are. From his vantage point on the cross next to Jesus, the thief is able to see that his transfer has been granted even if he isn’t going anywhere. Can we do the same from our vantage point? Can we give thanks in the midst of despair? Can we be hopeful in the midst of chaos? Can we act in the name of Christ even when we feel paralyzed? Can we recognize God through the haze of messages telling us that paradise awaits us somewhere else, anywhere else besides where we are, besides the kingdom of the beloved son of God into which we have

already been transferred? Can we? May God help all of our restless hearts to find their rest in the very heart of Jesus Christ. Amen.