

“Focused on Christ”

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First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, July 28, 2013

Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 107:1-9, 43  
New Testament Lesson – Colossians 3:1-11

It's summer – a time for baseball, evening walks, picnics, and insects, like ants. Have you ever seen an ant with wings? Most people may not know this, but many ants are actually born with wings. They use them early in life, especially in mating, which takes place in midair.

And yet, even though they have experienced the joy of flying, there comes a time when they deliberately tear off their wings. As one expert says, “A young queen (ant)'s first task is to remove her wings. She may pull at them with her legs, or bend sideways to press them against stones or blades of grass.” And thus, a young ant goes from flying high in the sky to crawling through life along the ground.

The question is, if God could – and clearly God could – would God put the wings back on the ant? Of course not. In God's great wisdom, ants are made perfect just the way they are.

And so are we. Our problem is that, unlike ants who are designed to lose their ability to fly, we give up spiritual flight - the excitement and blessings of being God's chosen people - by actively engaging in things God never designed to do.

God never intended for us to tear off our spiritual wings, but that's what we do. We rub them against the rocky, rough and tumble areas of this world, till they're all battered and torn.

As human beings, it's in our nature is to test our limits, which is good, as long as we don't neglect our spiritual health in the process. Few among us have maintained the spiritual perfection God gives to us. Few, as in one – only Jesus Christ is perfect. Which means for us, only in Christ can we be perfected. Only in Christ can we nurture and reclaim our spiritual perfection, and the untold blessings that come with it.

This is what Colossians is pointing to when it says, “Your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” In other words, our spiritual wings can only take flight if we're committed to following Christ. Apart from Christ, our wings are hidden. They're useless, and we find ourselves lower than an ant crawling along the ground.

In fact, we are so low without Christ to guide us that Colossians gives a long list of terrible things we fall victim to: fornication (turning our bodies into a sexual playground), impurity (turning our backs on God), passion (which means allowing our baser instincts to override what we know is right and true), evil desire (turning away from that which is good), and greed (which is idolatry or putting ourselves

ahead of our God). And, as if that's not enough, Colossians adds to the list, cautioning us to "get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language." And then to cap it all off, Colossians says "Do not lie to one another, seeing (as how) you have stripped off the old self with its practices, and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

What Colossians means here is that we need to throw off those things that separate us from Christ and let the world see us as we truly are, as reflections of Christ's love and generosity and truth and purity.

In order for us to do that – in order for us to take off that which is impure and against what God intended – we need to allow ourselves to be renewed through greater and greater knowledge of Jesus Christ. By knowing and loving Christ, we become new creations able to fly high in the heavens.

Colossians continues, saying, Because "you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

A life lived in the spirit of the Lord - a life lived in the Spirit of love, forgiveness, generosity, and faith, who wouldn't want that? Nobody, Nobody who is aware of all that God provides, nobody who has faith in all that God is ready to accomplish in our lives, nobody who knows what God can bring us through and overcome on our behalf would ever turn his or her back on God.

And yet, we do it everyday. We do it because we forget. We go from being perfect in Christ to forgetful of Christ. We forget all the blessings that God provides for us; we forget that God is out ahead of us in life's circumstances, preparing a way forward, if we would only take it, if we would only follow God's way; we forget that God has already saved us from the world and from our own lower nature. We forget.

And so we go through life crawling along the ground, instead of sailing through the heavens as we enjoy God's blessings. But it's not too late for us to take wing again. It's not too late for us to let our spiritual, God-given wings take shape again.

Within each and every one of us there are spiritual wings. Our problem is, we've covered them up, allowed them to become torn. We've soiled them by loving the world too much and loving God too little.

"Do not lie to one another," says Colossians. Do not forget. Do not let each other down. Do not go through life oblivious to who you really are as a child of God. Do not hide your true spiritual nature behind the material, emotional, and psychological clutter of the world today.

As someone once observed, it used to be that Christians asked: "Are you saved?" Perhaps the equivalent question today is: "What are you hiding behind?"

We know that God is in all people, just dying to get out – literally dying on the cross to get out and shine in a darkened world, to get out in the midst of our heaviest of days, and to take flight. We know this, and if we can remember this, and remind each other of this, God will take flight in our lives and throughout all the world.

Our problem is we remember our troubles more than we remember our God. Only in being mindful of who God is in our lives can we be certain of ourselves and our place in the world.

Colossians urges us to not lie to one another about our true spiritual nature. It tells us to set aside what is false about ourselves, set aside our baser, earthly natures as we continually put on our spiritual selves, our Christ-like nature.

In Colossians, we are taught (quote) to “set (our) minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Colossians wants us to focus on Christ, not on earthly entanglements; to grow in him, not in the temptations of this world. If we do that, then the distractions of this world that bring us down and lay us low will slip away, and we will be free to grow day by day in our compassion, and kindness, and love, and peace, and gratitude.

What are some ways we can keep focused on Christ amid the distractions of this world? Maybe you have something you do on a regular basis to help you stay focused on Christ. Think of what that is; or what that could be? Does anybody have anything in mind – anything you’d like to shout out now and share as an example? ... Anything you do or can think of that you or others do to stay focused on Christ?

How about Bible study – I know many of you spend time reading and studying the Bible. What about prayer – and not just on-your-knees-every-morning prayer (although that’s quite good), but all kinds of prayer – like the little whispers of the heart when you see someone in need, someone you help if you can, but either way you lift that person up to God.

What about going out of your way to be nice to people – going out of our way to help someone? Doesn’t that help us keep focused on Christ and on the teachings of Jesus?

There are numerous ways to stay focused on Christ; numerous ways to busy ourselves with Christ-like behavior; lots of ways to be too busy being Christian for other things to drag us down. That’s a big part of being Christian – finding ways to do good, even though we’ll never be perfect.

In the end, what matters is not a perfectly flawless life avoiding sin, but instead a vital, loving and faithful life in relationship with Christ focusing on Christ, instead of on what troubles us or leads us astray. In the end, that’s **what matters most:** *focusing on Christ.*

By focusing our hearts and minds on Christ, we can be confident that Christ will quite naturally and effortlessly shine through in our lives

By focusing on Jesus and his teachings, we can be confident that any wrongheaded or misguided thinking or ways of being will quietly slip away.

And in there place there will be, for all the world to see, growing and vital signs of new and abundant life; new life taking shape, taking flight, day by day, just by our finding little ways each day to stay focused on Christ. Amen.

I encourage you - and all of us - to take up or recommit to a practice that helps you stay focused on Christ.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

O great and glorious ruler of the universe and ruler of our hearts, each and every day, we your people, are judged. We are judged by others, and we judge ourselves.

We measure ourselves against others in society, forgetting to put your example first in our lives. We seek the approval of our teachers, our bosses, our neighbors or our friends, O God – more than we seek your approval.

Help us sense again that still, soft voice that beckons us to a new reality, a new way of measuring ourselves. Not by what we have or what we wish we had compared to others, but by the condition of our souls and by how we treat the people in our lives.

God, speak to us again your higher callings, and remind us who our judge really is. We pray that you will walk with us each and every step, as we work to live into your vision for us, as individuals and as families and communities of faith.

And Lord, help us to judge ourselves and our world against your standards, the higher and purer standards of love, grace, and spiritual abundance, the standards that are reflected in the prayer that you taught us to pray whenever we gather in your name, the prayer we lift up this day, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.