

Ordinary People Build The Church
Colossians 1:1-10

We began our service by singing that great old hymn by Timothy Dwight:

I love thy kingdom, Lord,
the house of thine abode,
the church our blest Redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.

I love thy church, O God:
her walls before thee stand,
dear as the apple of thine eye
and graven on thy hand.

For her my tears shall fall,
for her my prayers ascend;
to her my cares and toils be giv'n,
'til toils and cares shall end.

Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heav'nly ways,
her sweet communion, solemn vows,
her hymns of love and praise.¹

I must confess, I love the church of God! I've given my entire vocational life to the service of Christ and his church. And if you're like me then I suspect you love his church as well. Oh, you know the church isn't a perfect institution – no institution is where humans are involved – but there's something about her walls, her ways, her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise that you deeply, deeply cherish. And that love, I suspect, explains your presence here. After all, there are many other places you could have been this morning, but you chose to be here – in church today!

But what is the church? Is it the building? No, though the building may be part of it. More than the building, the church is the people. In writing to the church at Colossae, the apostle Paul gives us a glimpse of the church in that city and answers the question: What is the church? According to Paul, the church is the community of saints – faithful people in communion with Christ who have received the grace of God and peace with God through faith in the Christ of God. It is that community of people filled with the love of God who have the hope of heaven as they live fruitful lives of loving service to God and neighbor. Now that's a lengthy definition of the church, so let's look at it in detail to see how we arrived at it from Paul's description of it in his correspondence with the church at Colossae.

¹ *I Love Thy Kingdom Lord* by Timothy Dwight, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville, TN, 1989, hymn #540.

First, the church is a community of saints – faithful people in communion with Christ. So, Paul begins his letter with these words: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae.” (Col. 1:1-2) So, the church is a community of saints and faithful people in communion with, or in friendship with, Jesus Christ. And just in case you weren’t aware, saints are not people who are extraordinarily holy; instead, saints are just ordinary people set aside to worship and serve a holy God.

Second, the church is a community of saints or faithful people in communion with Christ who have received the grace of God and peace with God through faith in the Christ of God, that is, Jesus Christ our Lord. Remember, the word “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. It is his title. It’s the Greek version of the Hebrew word “Messiah” which refers to the One whom God has chosen or anointed to bring grace and peace to all people. So, Paul writes, “...to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae” and then he wishes them “grace (which is another word for God’s unmerited favor – God’s loving mercy poured out on to us, not because we are good, but because God is good) grace and peace from God our Father.” (Col. 1:2)

Third, in addition to being a community of saints – faithful people in communion with Christ who have received the grace of God and peace with God through faith in the Christ of God, the church is also a community of people filled with the love of God who have the hope of heaven as they live fruitful lives of loving service. So, Paul continues and says, “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel (i.e. the story of Jesus) that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves...” (Col. 1:3-6) That fruit was the fruit of loving service.

So that’s the church. It is that collection of saints – faithful people in communion with Christ who have received the grace of God and peace with God through faith in the Christ of God. It is that community of people filled with the love of God who have the hope of heaven as they live fruitful lives of loving service to God and neighbor.

But who cares? Why is the church important? After all, there are many fine charitable organizations in our community and each of them contributes to the culture and quality of life in our community. There’s the American Legion and the VFW, the Kiwanis, the Lions, and the Rotary Club. There’s Help the Needy and Habitat for Humanity, and many other fine organizations besides. And many of these organizations meet right here in our own church; organizations such as Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, PEO and 4-H, and many others, too. With all these fine organizations, who needs the church? Why is the church important, after all?

Well the church is not better than these organizations but it is different from them. You see, its mission is unique. It is in and through the church that people come into communion with Christ and begin to enjoy his friendship. It’s in and through the church

that people receive the grace or loving favor of God which includes the forgiveness of sin and many other blessings besides. It's in and through the church the people experience peace with God, both now and forever. It's in and through the church that people find the hope of heaven and lose their fear of death. It's in and through the church that people are taught by Christ to love with a special kind of love – what the bible calls “agape” love – which is a selfless and self-sacrificing love. As imperfect as the church so often is, the world is a much better place because the church exists!

But why the United Methodist Church? After all, there are more than a dozen churches in or near our town. Why is it important to have a United Methodist Church in Woodland Park? Are we better than all the other churches around us? Do we have some corner on truth that they don't possess? No! We're not any better, nor are we any worse than our sister churches, but we may be a little bit different. And perhaps that difference is best identified in our denominational motto: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. You see, there's a certain sort of openness to modern Methodism that you don't always find in religion. At our best, we are a church whose hearts are open to all people, whose doors are open to welcome everyone, and whose minds are open to new truth and fresh insight to complement our traditional and historic faith. Whether or not that's what makes us different from our sister congregations is anyone's guess. But I'm glad there is a United Methodist Church in town! Aren't you?

So far, we've seen what the church is and why the church is important, but who builds the church and how did this church come to be? Well above all else, Christ builds the church. That's why he said to the apostle Peter, “I will build my church.” (Mt. 16:18) Without his work and blessing, no church would ever come into being or remain in existence. But Christ builds his church through ordinary people like you and me. And we're introduced to one of those ordinary people through our reading in Colossians. That person is Epaphras. Epaphras is so ordinary that he is only mentioned three times in the New Testament: here in Colossians 1, again in Colossians 4, and finally in Paul's little letter to Philemon.

You see, the apostle Paul didn't start the church at Colossae. He probably never even visited it. It was started by Epaphras; and everything Paul knew about that church was told to him by this very ordinary man. That's why Paul says in Colossians 1:7-8, “This (gospel) you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.”

How did Epaphras build the church at Colossae? He built it by his preaching, his praying, and his labor on their behalf. You see, it was Epaphras who first preached the gospel to the citizens of Colossae as we have already observed in Colossians 1:7-8. He not only preached to them, but he also prayed for them. In Colossians 1:9, Paul says, “For this reason, since the day we heard from Epaphras (the news about your faith and love), we have not ceased praying for you...” Doubtless, Epaphras joined Paul and his other companions in praying for the Colossian Christians. In fact, in Colossians 4:12, Paul confirms this fact when he writes to the Colossians saying, “(Epaphras) is always

wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills.” In addition to this preaching and praying, Epaphras was ever laboring on behalf of that little church in Colossae. That’s why Paul calls him a “fellow servant” and a “faithful minister” in Colossians 1:7. And that’s why, in Colossians 4:13, Paul says, “I testify for (Epaphras) that he has worked hard for you...” And so, by his preaching, prayers, and labor, along with Christ’s abundant blessing, an ordinary man named Epaphras, built the church at Colossae!

Well forty-one years ago, this summer, some very ordinary people came together to build a Methodist church in Woodland Park; people like Jean Byers, Gary and Janice Richey, Ginny Shippey, Brooke and Karolyn Smith, and Elise Tiedt. There was preaching by the Reverend Lloyd Nichols, supported by his wife Leona. And there was praying by those I’ve mentioned and many others, also, whose names I do not know. And there was lots of labor to be done, too: setting up and tearing down for worship in the school gym, reading scripture, singing in the choir, teaching classes, buying property, and overseeing the construction of the first church building – all done by very ordinary people.

And the work never ends...not until Jesus comes! Throughout these past 41 years, a whole host of ordinary people have taken turns at preaching, praying, and laboring to keep this church alive. Today, 80 people are listed on our leadership roster. People like John Schafer who chairs our Church Council; Sam Gould who serves as vice-chair and leads our Stewardship Team; Karen Cooper who serves as our office administrator; Marcene Etchieson who serves as Lay Leader; Patti Metz who leads our Trustees; Mike Theimer who leads our Safety Team; Lynda Morgan who heads our Staff-Parish Relations Committee; Vicki Sapp who chairs the Finance Committee; Rick Shafer who has served as our Treasurer and is about to be replaced by Ingrid Weihe; Vicki Huffor, our Financial Secretary; Keith Sheldon who leads Planned Giving; Mary Anne Sheldon who leads our Invitational Ministry Team; Marcia Myers who leads our Integrational Team; Joe Baumgardner and Wendy Davis who lead us in Mission; Ann Snipes, who directs our Worship Committee; Cherese Bennett who leads our choir; Gary Myers who leads our bell choir; and Marci Nickelsburg who leads our ministry with children and youth; not to mention all of you who serve on these various teams and committees, or those of you who teach our various bible classes or lead our various fellowship groups, or those who serve as our musical accompanists or in our sound booth Sunday after Sunday! Ordinary people who love this church and keep its ministry alive!

Now this is the second in a series of sermons on ordinary people. Last Sunday we saw how ordinary people help the needy. This Sunday we’ve seen how ordinary people build the church through preaching, praying, and just plain laboring! By now you should realize that this series of sermons isn’t really about ancient characters. It’s about you! Thank God for ordinary people who love the church!! What would we ever do without you? And so, we sing:

We love thy kingdom, Lord,
the house of thine abode,

the church our blest Redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.

For her our tears shall fall,
for her our prayers ascend;
to her our cares and toils be giv'n,
'til toils and cares shall end.

Yes, thank God for ordinary people who preach, and pray, and labor, and love the church of God! And all God's people said: Amen!