



CHRIST CENTERED LIFE

We are going back to Colossians 1 today.

Intro - a Different Story

One of the things that defines us as Christians is the unique story that we believe we are part of.

Everybody, Christian and non-Christian, understands himself or herself through their stories. We all believe some narrative about where we came from, who we are, how we came to be in the place we are in, what the meaning of all of it is, and where we are headed.

For example, many in our culture believe that our story is this: we came to be only through naturalistic causes. We were formed by chance and time out of stardust, and for this brief moment that dust became conscious and it is us. And we will become stardust again. So we need to make the absolute most of every moment because you only live once.

So if we believe that is our story, then any element of our lives that seems non-ideal or unfulfilling must be changed at all costs, because we only have so much time. So if the house you live in doesn't satisfy, if the marriage you are in, or not in, doesn't satisfy, if the

job doesn't satisfy, make the change, make life thrilling, because you'll be stardust again soon. Carpe Diem.

Or there's the story that we are the makers of our own identities, and we can be anybody we want to be with enough effort. And we see people who have done it, who started from the bottom, worked like crazy, and became who they wanted to be. So we see ourselves in their stories - I want to be like them.

Or there's the story that we are surrounded by people who want to keep us down - they want us to conform to their ways, and the only way we will ever be satisfied is if we don't let those haters keep us down and we forge our own paths through life.

And those stories get reinforced in our movies, in advertisements for products, in our self-help books and podcasts, and even in casual conversations with friends that reinforce those narratives and tell us that anyone who tells us a different story is a hater and only wants to keep us down.

So we all see ourselves as part of a story. Maybe we're failing to be who we want to be in the story, maybe we're succeeding, maybe we're still an unsung hero or our time hasn't come yet, but we expect to one day be the hero of the story.

Or we hit mid-life and start to realize that we may never fully live out that story, and it creates a panic and an urgency to seize the day and use it to make much of ourselves.

The stories that we see ourselves as part of shape us and drive us, and we all have a defining narrative for our lives.

But Christians see ourselves as part of a different story: the story of Jesus and his redemption of his people and his rescue of the creation.

It's a story summed up in Colossians 1:15-20:

Colossians 1:15–20 [15] He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. [19] For in him all

the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

So Cody laid out our story as told by this passage last week, a story with four main plot points:

1. Creation - Jesus is firstborn, He is supreme over all creation, and He created all things and holds all things together. (v.15-18) At the core of reality is not just matter and energy, but a personal God who made all things, who made us. Who made both visible and invisible things: the natural world isn't all there is to creation, there are invisible things as well. And it was all created for HIS glory - through him and for him (verse 16). He's the hero of this story.

2. Fall - sin came in to the world and there was now enmity between the Creator and Creation. Peace had to be made (v.20) because the creation is fighting back against the Creator.

3. Redemption - Even though sin had brought death and brokenness in the world, God promised to redeem the world from its fallenness. And he did this by sending his Son, Jesus to live a perfect life, die on the cross for sins, and raise from the dead securing victory over sin, Satan, and death. Now all those who repent of their sin and turn in faith to Jesus can be reconciled back to the Lord and exist as part of His body, the church (verse 18).

4. Restoration - Even though Jesus' life, death, and resurrection accomplished our redemption, we aren't fully restored yet. Creation is still broken as an effect of the fall, and even God's people aren't fully better. We still live with sin in the world and sin in our hearts. Death is still a reality. Satan is still active. BUT, Jesus will come again and bring final restoration, with new heavens and a new earth where His people will dwell for all eternity. There's coming a day (verse 20) when He will reconcile all things to Himself.

The long war where creation fights back against Creator will be over.

So our story tells us who we are, what we need, where we are headed. It explains the world as it is today. It tells us where we fit, and it is inevitable that that story will change how we think and live.

And believing that story will so set us apart from people who believe other defining narratives that we will feel out of place here.

If we are not just the product of chance and time, then we have dignity and worth, and see the dignity and worth in everyone else because they were made by a Creator in His image. So in a world that is increasingly only recognizing the dignity and worth of people on my side who agree with me, and dismisses the dignity and worth of everyone else, we should stand out and not fit.

If we will live forever, it changes how we view time, and our days, and how we feel as our bodies slowly fall apart and we realize that not all of our dreams for this life have been fulfilled or will be fulfilled. For us, ultimate fulfillment happens when we get to that fourth plot point - to the restoration. So we don't need to fear the passing of our days.

If we are made in the image of God, but fallen sinful beings, that explains many of our motivations and why people do the things they do.

If we have been redeemed by His grace alone, and are the recipients of that kind of mercy and forgiveness, we will be forgiving and merciful people. That story will shape us.

If we were made not by impersonal forces and by chance, but were deliberately made by a personal God, a God who forever exists as trinity, in divine community of Father, Son, and Spirit, then relationship is at the core of reality. And if we are made in His image, then we are relational beings.

So relationships are not optional, but essential to who we are. And as we live in this time between redemption and the final restoration of all things, God has ordained that we cultivate Christian relationships and reinforce the story we believe by organizing into local churches.

So we'll focus today on one main sentence in this passage, the first half of verse 18:

[Colossians 1:18a](#) And he is the head of the body, the church.

One of the important subplots in our story is that Jesus is the head of the body of people called the church, and the church plays a vital role in every Christian's story. We are relational beings, made in the image of the ultimate relational being, and the setting for many of our most vital relationships is the church. And because our stories are told to us and reinforced by the community around us, the local church is the place where, on Sundays and throughout the week, we reinforce for one another the story we share.

So What is the Church?

The word church in the Bible, the Greek word ekklesia, is an assembly or a gathering.

And there are two main ways the Bible uses the word church.

One is that it can mean both the **universal fellowship of all Christians** through all time and includes Christians in heaven and living believers today.¹ The Capital-C Church of Jesus Christ. The Apostles Creed calls it the “holy catholic church - which doesn’t mean Roman Catholic, but the word catholic means “universal.” There is a universal church that includes all Christians.

And two is the **local, organized gathering of believers**. The living members of that universal church organize into local gatherings of believers, local assemblies.

Every Christian is part of the universal church (“we are baptized by the Spirit into one body” - 1 Corinthians 12:13), and every Christian is called to participate in the life of the local assembly.

Most of the New Testament was written to be read at the gathering of the local church. And it’s written with the assumption that Christians are connected to visible, physical church community. Much of the new testament doesn’t make sense outside of that context.

So the local church is God’s design.

Sometimes we can think that really authentic Christianity is big on the universal church - everybody loves that we are part of the gathering of all Christians through all time. But we are suspicious of organized religion.

After all, Jesus’s biggest run-ins were with the organized religion and religious leaders of his day. You don’t have to look far for stories about the harm done by churches and religious institutions, and on top of that, many of us have experienced the harm at the hands of churches and church leaders. And some of the hardest parts of the Christian life seem to happen at church.

¹ Allison, Greg. Sojourners and Strangers. P 29.

So it would be easy to think that local, organized church is a man-made invention, even if we believe in Jesus and the universal church that Christians are all part of.

But Jesus is always working to make things on earth as they are in heaven. And He has ordained that there would be earthly manifestations of heavenly realities - local churches should be striving to be earthly manifestation of the church as it is in heaven.

And in these days before the restoration, God's plans to bless the world center on the local church, and his blessings radiate out from the church.²

A healthy local church is a God-formed community that holds up the truth of the gospel of Christ, and serves both as a model community and missionary community.

A model community in that, as we are sanctified and grow in our knowledge of Christ and love for one another, we can show the greater community what life is like when Jesus has entered it. God is forming in the church a new nation within all nations, a new people within all people. It's a new nation, a new community.

And the church is a missionary community because there is a constant invitation extended from individuals and the community into the life of Christ and the life of this redeemed community. So it has a central place in God's heart and plan.

1 Peter 2:9 "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

So a church is compared to a new nation, a new people. To proclaim the excellencies of Jesus. Done right, church is a model community and a missionary community.

The church is also called a household:

1 Timothy 3:15 "15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."

So the fact that it is a household shows us the kinds of relationships we are supposed to have. We are brothers and sisters. We've been unified into a family by Christ.

² Watkin, Christopher. Biblical Critical Theory. 461.

Sometimes we think a church is more like an airplane - when we gather in an airplane, we are all going to the same place, but we are all there for different reasons. Some people are there for a business trip, some are heading out on vacation, some are headed to a family gathering or a wedding or a funeral. We all have different reasons for going to the same place, but we all have our own agendas and no real commonality.

But the church is a household - we are all headed to the same place, but we also have a common identity.

And we have a common agenda as we gather: to be a pillar and buttress of the truth.

The church is supposed to be like a pillar at a museum that holds up a bust or a statue so everyone can see it. We are to hold up the truth, to hold up Jesus, for all to see. To tell a different story to ourselves and to the world.

So local churches exist to:

Worship Jesus

To hold up the truth of the Gospel for all to hear

To nurture the faith of men and women from all generations in community

And to constantly witness to the reality of another world:

Philippians 3:20-21 “20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

We gather to be a representation on earth of what is in heaven. And to continually tell the story that forms us - we were created by God, we fell, we were redeemed by Jesus, and we are headed to a restoration.

We are constantly being told another story about where we came from, who we are, where we're headed. We're being shaped by those other stories. So for 2000 years, on the day that Jesus rose from the dead, churches of all shapes and sizes have gathered to be reminded of our ultimate and true story.

We gather as a household, which contains men and women of all ages, under qualified human leadership of elders, to be reminded of our story and fuel Christ-centered community.

Now there are a lot of other good things Christians do during the week, lots of ways we gather and serve. But as good as many of them are, they don't take the place of gathering with the local church.

For example, about **350 people livestream our services every week**, and a couple thousand more watch or listen to the message at some point during the week. And I'm among them - last week I was in the kids class upstairs, I didn't come to the main service, so I watched Cody's sermon online. Which is a good thing, and I'm glad we can do that, I was especially glad we could do that during the pandemic when we couldn't gather.

But watching or listening online isn't church. It's good, but isn't participating in church. It's learning, it can be worship, it can glorify God. But because church requires gathering, it isn't church.

Also there are many good ministries that our church carries out - youth ministries during the week, young adults ministries, mens and womens ministries, small groups. And those are good, but they aren't the whole household. If two sisters go out for coffee, that's good, but it wouldn't be accurate to call that a family reunion.

Also, there are dozens of great parachurch ministries - ministries that are governed outside of the local church. I've benefited from participating in younglife, I'm on the board of a Christian camp, a bunch of FCA staff and volunteers attend here. And they are all doing vital kingdom work.

But those things don't take the place of the church. They aren't all generations, they aren't organized with pastors, they aren't supposed to be a whole Christian society. They're good, but not church.

The church in our day in our country has fallen on hard times. Church attendance is shrinking year over year in the states, and churches, especially here in the northeast, are held in lower and lower regard among the broader community.

Which is understandable. There is a crisis of abuse among clergy. And at the same time, the values of the culture have moved into increasing conflict with the values of the Bible. So churches are maligned deservedly because of our unfaithfulness to live out what we

believe, because of our hypocrisy. And churches are also maligned because of our faithfulness to what we believe. So we get a bad rap deservedly because of our sins and failures, and also because of faithfulness.

And truly bad churches are real, and they are just about the worst thing there is.

When somebody is supposed to nurture and instead they abuse, that does real damage.

An abusive parent does real, deep, life-altering damage because parents are supposed to nurture. And a church likewise that abuses does real damage. And I know there are a number of people here trying to recover from truly awful things done to you in the name of God by churches. And its a struggle - a struggle to believe that this can be good.

But if the church is the body of Christ (Colossians 1:18), I have to believe that it is possible for local churches to be healthy and for the blessings of God to radiate from them.

What our culture tends to do is say, "There are good parents out there, but some are truly bad." But, when assessing churches, they will say that because there are some truly bad ones, they're all suspect. But we don't do that with moms and dads. There are truly ugly expressions of the family, and our hope in response to that is to nurture good families.

And there are ugly expressions of church, and our hope in response to that is to nurture a good one.

Now churches will always, as human institutions, been flawed and have to deal with sin. But as Spurgeon said, "Still imperfect as it is, it [the church] is the dearest place on earth."

He went on, "...the church is not an institution for perfect people but a sanctuary for sinners saved by grace, who, though they are saved, are still sinners and need all the help they can derive from the sympathy and guidance of their fellow believers. The church is the nursery for God's weak children where they are nourished and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep - the home for Christ's family."

Good churches can exist. Not churches that are sinless under leaders who are sinless. Those don't exist. Not ones where the people are always kind, because people like that don't exist. But good ones.

Anyone who has been part of one long enough can point to some ways they messed up. They are all deficient and lacking.

But there are churches where Christ is pre-eminent, where His word is taught faithfully, where the people are shepherded lovingly, where the gathering focuses on Jesus, where the love and blessing of God radiates out into the community. They do exist. There are churches where Christ is preeminent despite their flaws.

So how do we keep Christ preeminent in the church?

(1) We keep Christ preeminent in our lives.

The church is a body, it is the sum of its parts. So as we accept sins in our hearts and lives, if we live lives for self, if we live according to a different story, that negatively affects the church. We are relational people, and we bring our own sins into the relationships of the church, and that can weaken and distract the church.

We're not islands, and when we accept sins in our lives, we are accepting them into the church. If I take my eyes off of the cross and grow arrogant, enough people like me will make the church arrogant.

If I don't cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and am not kind, enough people like me will make an unkind church.

If I worship Christ with my life, if I make genuine efforts to repent of my sins, if I work to make peace and restore relationships, if I care for the community during the week, if I serve in love, if I give and sacrifice, if I strive to raise my kids to know Christ, and if enough people do the same, we will be a healthier church.

(2) We don't confuse the church in the era of redemption with the church in the era of restoration.

(We temper our expectations.)

We all know what we're like. I know I still struggle with selfishness, I'm not always kind, I'm still beset by sin. And if I'm like that, you're like that too, so I can also expect that the Christian community will always be rocked and ravaged by selfishness and disobedience to God.

Every Christian is simultaneously a saint and a sinner. Until the restoration when the sinner part is completely gone, that will be the case. So every church, on its best day, is made up of people who are simultaneously saints and sinners.

So we can expect that not only will we have weaknesses and disagreements and disappointments and an inability to see eye to eye. But there will be lies, divisions, arrogance, broken friendships, broken trust, bad leaders, gossip, betrayal, adultery - - until Jesus returns and perfects us.

True Christian community is always flawed Christian community. True church is always flawed church. It is sure to be that way.

And if we always assume that flawed community is false community, we will never experience true Christian community.

This reality doesn't excuse anything. Jesus warns of real punishment for the ones who bring sin into the community, especially when it does damage to the naive.

There have been so many times when people come to the faith, come to the church with admittedly naive notions of what church will be, but then they are shocked to be met with real evil. And so many have never recovered a vital faith after having collided with evil in a surprising place. So bringing sin into the community is a big deal.

But we need to avoid what Bonhoeffer called a "wish-dream," or an expectation that Christian community must be utopia or it isn't Christian community at all.

He wrote, *"Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. ..."*

Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and

earnest and sacrificial. ... He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. .. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure...So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer - [Life Together](#)

The Christian community is a gift from God, but not a utopia, and we shouldn't demand that it be one. If we do, we will miss out on Christian community.

Beware of believing that the flaws that you find in the Christian community are evidence that it is a false community. Beware of waiting to find a community without sin and weakness before you will commit to one. Beware of finding the place where everyone agrees with you on everything before you'll commit.

I've had a number of friends with Utopian visions go out to plant churches. And inevitably sin comes there too. They strive to be holy, as they should, but they expect perfection in the community. And it never comes.

But remember our story centers on a Savior, and that savior is not us or our church. Church will not solve all of your problems. Christ is the one who, in the end, will if you'll trust Him. And Christ can stay preeminent in the church only if we continually deny that we are Him, and continually admit our flaws.

If you believe a flawed community is a false community, you will never experience the benefits of community.

So keep Christ pre-eminent in your life if you want Him preeminent here. Don't expect church now to be what church will be in eternity.

(3) We follow the pattern of the church in Acts that helped them keep Christ preeminent.

[Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching](#)

The apostles, remember, were the guys who were with Jesus from the time of His baptism through his resurrection. They learned from him directly, they were witnesses of the miracles, and were commissioned by Jesus to carry his teaching to the world. In person, and in their inspired writings which are now called the new testament.

And a core element, the first one mentioned, about this early church is that they were devoted to the teaching of the apostles.

Teaching was a core element of the church. In fact, they freed up some teachers from other important tasks so they could be devoted to the ministry of the word. They were feeding widows, which was important, but they wanted teaching to be central so they divided up the tasks and kept the teachers free to teach.

And while we don't have the apostles with us today, we have their teaching in the Bible to be devoted to. And for a church to remain strong, we have to remain devoted to the teaching of the Bible. It's not the only thing we do, but it is at the core. To keep Christ preeminent in the church gathered, we must teach the Bible, and teach it as it was written to be taught - pointing to Jesus.

Because the centrality of Christ in a church can leak.

Carson says it usually happens like this:

The gospel is accepted
The gospel is assumed
The gospel is confused
The gospel is lost.

This happens everywhere. The gospel assumed is the name of the game in the contemporary American church. So many believe the gospel, and if you ask someone they'll tell you the right way to become a Christian. But the teaching is best practices, how to live a better life, how to have a great marriage, how to be a better you. (You preeminent, not Jesus preeminent.)

And so the gospel becomes confused. And then, within a generation, it is lost.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship,

Fellowship is when you are in it together with others.

And this is an important balance. A healthy church is one where you hear from God and hear from his word. But also you have real friends and relationships.

Where you get a sense that not only do you need to hear from Jesus and strive to live for Him, you need to connect with others. You need to have your life knit together with the lives of others.

That's so essential to keep Christ central in our lives.

And remember, this was happening in the midst of a church of 3000+. He's not describing what they had when the church was 120 before they blew up. This is after.

So that's important for us. It is true that at Grace Road, you can't be friends with everybody. It is too big. But everybody needs to be diligent about building relationships somewhere. And while it's true that when its big you can't know everyone, it's clearly not true that when its big you can't have those friendships that are every bit as deep and helpful. We all just have to be cool with not being Jesus who knows everyone.

If you've been here a couple of years, you don't need more church friends. But the new people do. So please redouble your efforts at fighting clickishness, work to meet new people here, and welcome them into the fellowship.

And being devoted to the fellowship means that these people become a big part of your life. Again, not all of them, but a pocket of people here should become very close friends. People that you're open and honest with, unguarded around, challenged by. People that occupy such an important spot in your life that you change some plans around them.

Over and over this says they were "together." They didn't live together - they didn't practice widespread communal living. They had distinct homes. But they were in each others' lives, they were friends, they were committed to practical expressions of their faith in Jesus.

The program life of the early church seemed pretty simple: weekly gatherings on the Lord's day, and then daily gathering in homes.

And this is why we do have Grace Groups and Grow groups- 2 gatherings - large for worship and preaching and surface connections, small for depth of conversation, relationship, and prayer.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread

People wonder whether this is the Lord's Supper or just eating together. Verse 46 mentions eating together separately, it would be strange to mention the same thing twice.

But they regularly observed the Lord's supper - which was given to us by Jesus to keep the church focused on Jesus. It's meant to engage the senses and the whole person in this reminder of who Jesus is and what he did.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They prayed.

Prayer is the most fundamental act of faith and dependence on God.

So to keep Christ preeminent in the church, we need to be people who pray. We do some big sweeping prayers here in service, we do more specific and personal prayers in groups, we pray at our prayer breakfasts and tonight at elder led prayer.

Because ultimately if our church will be a community through which God blesses both us and Rochester, if we will be a model community and a missionary community, if we will hold up Christ for all to see, if we are going to quickly confess our sins and restore relationships with each other, we are going to need the Lord.

But again, the story we believe should shape us into people who pray.

We believe that even though sin had brought death and brokenness in the world, God promised to redeem the world from its fallenness. And he did this by sending his Son, Jesus to live a perfect life, die on the cross for sins, and raise from the dead securing victory over sin, Satan, and death. Now all those who repent of their sin and turn in faith to Jesus can be reconciled back to the Lord.

And because he has been that gracious and kind to us in the Gospel, we can expect that when we pray, our prayers are heard by a kind and gracious Father who has already proven in Christ that He loves to come to our aid, and has done so again and again.

Prayer of Confession:

Father, we thank you that you have made us for each other and for community. We confess that we fall short of your glory and live for self, as if the other stories are true and our faith is just a myth. So forgive us.

Jesus, we thank you for going to the cross to pay the price for our selfishness. Thank you that you always perfectly cared, you worked to forgive, you worked to bring peace.

And Spirit, as the recipients of that work of Christ, we pray that you'd make us people who extend that to one another, and extend that offer of peace with God to the community around us.

Assurance of Pardon:

1 Peter 1:3–4

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- (1) Discuss how we are shaped by the stories we believe. What stories does our culture tell us about who we are and what our life should be? How do those stories shape us?
- (2) Why are we so often enthusiastic about the universal church but suspicious of the local church?
- (3) What are some of the biblical reasons for the existence of the local church?
- (4) Discuss Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the wish-dream.
- (5) What does healthy church participation look like?