

“Incarnate Ministry”

Colossians 4:7-4:9

August 21, 2022

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return again this morning to Paul’s letter to the Colossian church.

In this last portion of the letter, Paul turns his attention to specific Christians who are with Paul, who are with the Colossian church, or who are traveling between them.

We’ll take these final words in two sections, both today and next Lord’s Day.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning – Colossians 4:7-9.

The Apostle Paul writes:

^{4:7} Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, look upon us and deliver us,

for we do not forget your word.

Be our advocate and redeem us,

and give us life according to your promise.

Great is your mercy, Lord,

and so we ask you to give us life according to your law.

Help us now to love your word,

and give us life according to your steadfast love.

The sum of your word is truth,

and every line of your word endures forever.

And so help us to attend to it now, and to grow in your truth,

in Jesus's name. Amen

[Based on Psalm 119:153-154, 156, 159-160]

Introduction

Our text this morning is a short one. And if we're honest, it's the sort of paragraph we often glide right by when we read the Bible, rather than one that we pause and reflect on. But it's also a text that, if we are willing to dig into it just a bit more deeply, we see that it has significant instruction for us and for our lives, about the Lord, and about how he works in us and among us.

In these three verses we see four ways that the Lord was at work in the Colossian church, and with that, four ways that he is at work in and among us as well.

What we see is that the Lord works in our lives by sending us Tychicuses, by sending us Onesimuses, by sending us stories, and by rooting us in community.

So: The Lord sends us Tychicuses, the Lord sends us Onesimuses, the Lord sends us stories, and the Lord roots us in community.

Let's consider each of those now.

The Lord Sends Us Tychicuses

First, the Lord sends us Tychicuses.

That is the focus of verses seven and eight. So who is Tychicus?

Tychicus is mentioned five times in the New Testament [Acts 20:4, Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 4:7, 2 Timothy 4:12, Titus 3:12] as a friend and co-laborer of the Apostle Paul, sometimes traveling with him, sometimes delivering letters for him, sometimes serving as a substitute minister to a congregation so that someone like Titus or Timothy could step back from a specific ministry for a time. [Robeck, 930] Here Paul describes him as "a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord."

And what Tychicus is called to do here is to tell the Colossians more about what has been going on with Paul, to encourage the Colossian Christians, and to help explain Paul's letter to them. He was to serve as a minister, applying the words of this letter to the congregation, and telling them more of what the Lord was doing elsewhere. [Beale, 354; Moo, 334, 336]

Here's what I want to emphasize here, though. Tychicus was, by Paul's testimony, a good man, and a faithful minister of Christ. But he wasn't Paul.

I mean, how we view people tends to be relative, right? If you are a Christian in Colossae, maybe you're glad to have Tychicus there ... but you'd probably rather have the Apostle Paul there ... wouldn't you?

Paul had never visited the Christians in Colossae. [Moo, 333] He'd been to Ephesus, but not Colossae. The Ephesian Christians got Paul ... but the Colossian Christians were stuck with Tychicus instead ... who I'm sure was a great man – a better man than I am ... but he still wasn't Paul.

Of course, Paul was in prison at the time of writing. But he still hadn't been to Colossae before ... and he makes no promises about coming in the future. Interestingly, in his letter to Philemon, Paul seems to indicate that he does have plans to visit Colossae, which makes it all the more curious that he doesn't mention that here, in his more public letter to the church in Colossae, but instead he focuses their attention on the fact that it is Tychicus being sent to them.

Despite Tychicus's faithfulness, I imagine there could have been a level of disappointment for the Colossian Christians about who the Lord was sending to them, when compared with who he had sent to others.

And we today are not so different. We look at the people the Lord sends us to minister to us – whether in formal roles as ministers or church officers or lay leaders ... or in informal roles as simply older Christians, or Christian friends ... and we are often a bit disappointed. Maybe we're disappointed when we consider their shortcomings in and of themselves. More often, I think, we're disappointed when we consider them in comparison to what we see of other Christians and other Christian leaders out there.

And that is, I think, heightened even more in our own context. With the small device that almost every one of us carries in our pockets, we can each access Christian bloggers and Christian podcasters and popular Christians on social media, who, frankly, seem much more insightful than the Christian peers and even the older Christians that the Lord has placed in our own lives. And we can wonder what good we can expect from these people around us – these Tychicuses – that the Lord has given us, and why he didn't instead send us those more mature and insightful and interesting Christians we can only hear from online.

And along the same lines, you are here gathered to hear a sermon from me this morning, and I am painfully aware, that each one of us, at this very moment, can access *thousands* of sermons instantly on our phones that will be more skillfully delivered, more theologically rich, *and* more homiletically powerful than anything I will say this morning. Which can lead us to wonder: What fruit can we really expect from a sermon here or from other Christians in our congregation here?

And so our tendency is to not expect the Lord to do much in our lives through the people here ... but to instead turn our attention to those more gifted celebrity Christians we see out there.

But it's worth stepping back and asking ourselves: Why do we tend to think this way? And I think there are a few reasons.

And one is that I think that we tend to think of how the Lord ministers to us as something that happens individually and directly, rather than through others. When it comes to the Lord's work in our lives, we tend to think of it in terms of just us and him.

And if that's how we think about how the Lord actively works in our lives, then it means that the potential for other people to help us and minister to us, depends almost completely on their own personal skills and abilities.

And if that's true ... then we might rightly wonder: why bother with the Tychicuses that've been sent to you? Isn't it better to collect what information and help you can from a distance from someone who's more like a Paul, and then just figure the rest out on your own, between you and the Lord? Because Tychicus may be a nice guy, but he's no one to really write home about ... and so why should we expect him to have a real meaningful impact on our spiritual lives?

And we might not say things like that out loud ... but it can be how we functionally operate when we relate to the Christians the Lord has placed around us.

But also, it's a way of thinking that's based on flawed assumptions and bad theology.

And it made me think this week about the musician Django Reinhardt. Reinhardt was a Romani-French guitar player, born in 1910.

By the age of eighteen, Reinhardt had established himself as a guitar virtuoso in the Paris jazz clubs. But then he suffered a terrible accident, in which the right side of his body was burned, and his left hand – the hand he would use for fretting on the guitar – was badly damaged. He lost most of the use of his ring finger and pinky, he was in and out of hospitals for over a year, and doctors said he would never play guitar again.

But through hours of work, and through his own musical genius, Django Reinhardt came up with a new way of playing his guitar by mainly using just two fingers, rather than four.

It was after that injury, that Reinhardt went on to form his jazz quintet, to hold his greatest performances, and to change jazz music, developing a whole new subgenre of it.

Now, why do I share that story?

Well, it's not because I want to claim that we're all like Django Reinhardt. It's because I want to claim that most of us are like his left hand. And so are the Tychicuses the Lord sends to us.

And we look at those Tychicuses the Lord sends us, and like the doctors who evaluated Reinhardt, we consider the hand just as a hand. And we see its flaws and shortcomings. And we declare what it won't be able to do. But we fail to consider who the hand is connected to.

The Bible tells us that the Church – the people of God – are the Body of Christ. They are his hands and feet in the world. And when we consider them apart from that – when we consider them in and of themselves rather than as members united to him, then we will be quick to write them off – to decide that they have nothing to offer us spiritually – maybe they could minister to other people, to people less spiritual than us, but not to us.

And so, turning away from them, we find ourselves looking out online, or in our books, or in our favorite podcasts, at people who seem like much more capable hands and feet of Christ. They seem to have use of every faculty, and everything looks right – like a beautiful hand in which every finger can move just right. By comparison, the people the Lord has sent to us in our lives seem disappointing – like a hand with two shriveled fingers.

But when we think that way, we forget that the most important thing is not how good the hand works on its own, but who the hand is connected to.

Django Reinhardt could do more on a guitar using a disabled and scarred left hand than any of us here could do using a perfect-looking hand. And in the same way, Jesus can do more in our lives using a flawed and scarred Christian we know than anyone else could do, using the most perfect-looking teachers, or speakers, or writers, or podcasters that are out there. Don't get me wrong – he'll use a Paul, or an Augustine, or a Calvin, and do amazing things. But you also wouldn't believe what he could do with a Tychicus ... or with those much less impressive than a Tychicus.

And that's true when it comes to our ministers here. It's true for our officers and lay leaders. It's true for the older Christians in your life. And it's true for Christian friends or the Christian spouse the Lord has given you.

Jesus Christ can use that imperfect member of his Body – that member who is like a hand with two unusable fingers ... and with the two good fingers that remain, he can do more than the best of us could with all five fingers.

If Christ, by the Spirit, continues to work in incarnate ways through his Body, the Church, then when he sends a Tychicus into our life, the most important question is not how much skill that person has on their own, but whether they are connected to the Lord, and what the Lord can do through them.

Now, of course, each Tychicus should work diligently to increase his skills, just as Reinhardt worked to get some limited use from his two bad fingers. And wisdom often calls us to try to fit people into roles that correlate with how the Lord has naturally gifted them. All of that is true. So don't hear what I'm not saying.

But at the end of the day, it will not be the unique skills of a Tychicus that determines his effectiveness in the lives of others, but it will be the Lord, who works through him, who determines his effectiveness.

So who are the Tychicuses that the Lord has put in your life? Whom have you brushed aside or undervalued? And how do you need to change your posture towards them to receive what the Lord may be seeking to do in your life through their ministry to you?

The first thing we see is that the Lord sends us Tychicuses.

The Lord Sends Us Onesimuses

Second, the Lord sends us Onesimuses.

In verse nine, Paul introduces a second individual that he's sending to and commending to the church at Colossae. After discussing Tychicus, Paul writes: "and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you."

Onesimus was a bondservant – a slave – from Colossae, who ran away from his master, and who may have stolen from his master in the process. [O'Brien, 266] He was not, when he left, a Christian, though his master was. Once he was away from Colossae, interestingly enough, Onesimus found the Apostle Paul – whom he may have heard his master speak about. [Rutherford, 2194] And through his relationship with Paul, Onesimus himself became a Christian. And now, along with this letter, Paul is sending Onesimus back to Colossae, both to reconcile with his master, and to be welcomed into the Christian community in Colossae.

Now, we spoke a couple weeks ago about how Paul approaches slavery in this letter, and we won't repeat that here. And it's not in this letter that Paul addresses Onesimus's good and protection in his relationship to his master, but in the letter to Philemon. [See Moo, 369-374 for a discussion of whether, in that letter, Paul implies that Onesimus should be immediately set free, and see chapter 7 of Esau McCauley's *Reading While Black* (p.137-163) for an excellent argument from the Scriptures as a whole against slavery.]

Here, in our text this morning, Paul's focus is on how the Christians in Colossae should receive Onesimus – who would still have been at this point a relatively new and young Christian.

By sending Tychicus, Paul was sending the Colossian church someone to minister to them. By sending Onesimuses, he was sending them someone for them to minister to: a new Christian, who had fled their town as a pagan. [Wright, 158]

And when we first hear that, it might sound nice and straightforward, but actually, it wasn't. Paul was knowingly putting the congregation in a situation where ministering to this new Christian he was sending to them could run the risk of significant losses to the functioning of the church.

Here's what I mean. While there is some scholarly debate, it seems most likely that Philemon himself was Onesimus's master. Philemon was a part of the Colossian church. And while Paul

had urged Philemon to be reconciled with Onesimus, he couldn't know how Philemon would respond. But Paul was calling on the church to receive and minister to Onesimus regardless of Philemon's response. It can be costly to risk upsetting a long-term church member. It can be more costly to risk upsetting a wealthy long-term church member, which Philemon likely was, as one who owned a bondservant. But we see that the risk is even greater when we realize from Philemon 2 that Philemon owned the house that the church in Colossae met and worshipped in. And Paul knew that. Depending on Philemon's response, ministering to Onesimus, as Paul was calling them to, could cost the Colossian church something.

And here's the point: We usually like to think of ministering to others – of ministering to the Onesimuses in our lives – in kind of idealistic way ... evoking warm images where the work we do is encouraging and appreciated, and everything goes great. But ministering to the people the Lord sends us is always costly. It's always sacrificial. At the least we must be willing to sacrifice our time and energy. But other times it can cost us more. But the Lord sends us Onesimuses, and calls us to minister to them, even though he knows that it could cost us – just as Paul knew that ministering to this Onesimus could cost the Christians in Colossae.

The Lord sends us Onesimuses – he sends us newer or younger or less mature Christians to minister to. Maybe all it costs us is our time and energy. Or maybe it costs us more. But it always at least risks costing us something. And accepting that risk and ministering to that person anyway is what the Lord calls us to.

So who are the Onesimuses in your life? Your children may be a few of your Onesimuses. But so might a younger Christian outside of your family, whom you have come to know in the church or in another setting. Who might the Lord be calling you to reach out to in that way? You don't need to be perfect to do that. Remember what the Lord can do even with a flawed and scarred member of his body.

Of course, beyond those who are just a few years younger in age or in their faith, there are also those who are much younger. In that sense, every Lord's Day our building is flooded with little Onesimuses. And you often hear of different opportunities you can take advantage of to minister to them here. Among those good opportunities, we continue to need more adults willing to minister to our covenant children in our Sunday school ministry.

Some of you have been really well fed here, spiritually speaking. You've attended many events, heard so much teaching – you've been poured into by others, and it's wonderful that you've been so eager to receive that. But you also may need to honestly consider whether the Lord, in this season, might be calling you to take some of what you have received and now pour it into others – maybe to pour it into our covenant children. We have dozens of little Onesimuses running around here every Sunday morning. How might the Lord be calling you to minister to them? It will cost you something – time and energy at the least. But the calling remains.

Whether children or adults – whether in our families or in our congregation or out in the world – the Lord sends us Onesimuses – he sends us people to minister to in concrete ways.

That's the second thing we see in our text.

The Lord Sends Us Stories

Third, the Lord sends us stories.

And I need to be specific about what I mean here. Of course the Lord sends us stories in the Scriptures. And those are the most important stories we have. But that's not the point I'm making here, because that's not the point made in our text. The point that is brought up in our text is that in addition to the Scriptures, the Lord also sends us stories about his work, and about the needs of his people, outside of the Scriptures.

Paul has told the Colossians some of what is going on in his life and ministry in this letter of Scripture. But he also sent Tychicus in part to tell them more about what was going on with him – to tell them additional stories about Paul's experiences, beyond what they had in the Word of God. And he wanted Tychicus to do this both for the good of the Colossians, who would hear the stories, and for the good of Paul who was passing on the stories.

In verse eight Paul shares that he wants the Colossians to hear these additional stories for their sake – that they may be encouraged in their hearts, he says. But back in verse three, in last week's text, it also becomes clear that he wants these stories shared for his sake, so that the Christians in Colossae might pray for him. [Wright, 159]

In sharing stories of how God has been at work, and how, from our point of view, we still need God to work – by sharing both the good news of what God has done in our lives and the ongoing prayer requests we still have for what he would do next – we minister to one another in concrete ways. We see how God is at work in the world, and we are encouraged. We see what needs there still are among God's people, and we are urged to go to God in prayer. This is the role that such stories play.

And it's a reminder that we need to tell one another stories about what is happening in our lives. Not just superficial pleasantries. Not just canned platitudes. But real, concrete details of our lives – of how God is at work, and how we are pleading with God to work going forward. We need to tell such stories, and we need to receive such stories. We each need that encouragement. And we each need that prayer from others.

Who do you have that kind of relationship with already? How can you cultivate it further? And especially if you don't have anyone like that in your life, who might you try to pursue such a relationship like that with, and how might you cultivate it?

We were not made to live the Christian life alone. And in large part, what living the Christian life together means is telling one another and hearing from one another the stories of what God is doing, and what we are asking him to do.

So, the Lord sends us Tychicuses, the Lord sends us Onesimuses, the Lord sends us stories ...

The Lord Roots Us in Community

Fourth, and finally, the Lord roots us in community.

The local community aspect of the Colossian church comes out in these verses. For one thing, it's interesting that in verse nine, when Paul says that Onesimus "is one of you" he seems to mean "he is a Colossian." [Moo, 336-337] Now, Paul is clear elsewhere that our membership in the Body of Christ outranks all other memberships in this world. But he reminds us here that those other memberships do still have value. Onesimus is not just a part of the general body of Christ. But he is a part of their local Colossian community – and now he is a part of their local Colossian Christian community.

That local community aspect comes out even more in verse sixteen when Paul emphasizes that he expects this letter and another to be read out loud in the gathered assembly of the local Colossian church. The letter is primarily to be read together – not separately or individually.

In these ways Paul reminds us that another key way that the Lord ministers to us is through rooting us in a specific Christian community.

Now, on some level this incorporates all we've talked about so far. It is in the specific local Christian community – in the specific congregation that the Lord has called us to – that he provides many of the Tychicuses and many of the Onesimuses and many of the stories through which he will minister to us and through us.

Which means that if you see a lack of Tychicus-like people in your life, or a lack of Onesimus-like people in your life, or a lack of extra-biblical stories of God's work in your life, probably the best thing you can do to start is not to just look for a Tychicus or an Onesimus or a story around you. Probably the best first step is simply to immerse and root yourself more deeply in a specific Christian community.

Is that something you need to do? Do you need to get to know more people here? Do you need to maybe come to more events? Or do you maybe need to seek to get together with more folks from here outside of Sunday morning? Maybe you need to reach out to someone and start up a text chat with them ... or make a phone call to them. Or maybe you need to even just step out a little more and talk to more people over coffee here in the narthex on Sunday. Being rooted in real Christian community will ordinarily mean connecting with the actual people the Lord has placed around you in your local congregation.

So, outside of the worship service, are there ways that you might need to more deeply root yourself here in Christian community?

That is an important question. But even as we ask it, we need to consider how we might need to be more rooted in community *within* worship as well.

Our livestream, and the technology that makes it possible, and the people here who have served to make it possible, are an incredible blessing. It made a level of connection in worship possible during the pandemic that wouldn't have been otherwise while taking initial precautions. It continues to be a blessing to those who, because of their own health issues, or the needs of those they are caring for, are unable to be here with us physically on the Lord's Day. It's also a wonderful way for folks who are considering coming and visiting us to get an initial picture of who we are and what our worship is like. In all those ways our online service is a gift that I am very thankful for.

At the same time, Paul's reminder here about community also reminds us that livestream worship is not our ideal for Christian worship. It's not the same as being here together.

And acknowledging that is not a statement against the livestream service. It's just an acknowledgement that physical presence does make a difference – something that should be kind of obvious.

If you need to worship at home through the livestream right now, my saying that isn't meant to delegitimize your worship – not at all. Rather it's meant to say that when it feels to you like it's not quite the same ... it's because it's not. Livestream worship is a good thing – but not the ideal thing.

And if you have been worshipping at home through the livestream ... and there's nothing really keeping you from joining us in person, then let this be an exhortation for you to join us here on the Lord's Day. Because there is more for you here than there is in your living room.

Now, how is that true? Well, there are a lot of ways we could approach that question. We know from Matthew 18:20 that while the Lord is always with each of his children, he is with them in special ways when they gather together. We also know that the Lord works in special ways through the sacraments, which require physical presence.

But we can go even more concrete than that. When you are here, by your very presence you minister to others, and they minister to you.

I remember a pastor friend of mine pointing out once that when you decide not to come to gathered worship, you're not just making a decision for yourself, but you're depriving others of something as well. Because if you came, someone was going to sit in the pew nearby. And your presence was going to have some kind of impact on them and on their worship.

When we sing, for example, they were going to hear not just a collection of voices, but highlighted in it they would hear your nearby voice in particular. But if you stay home, they won't. [This comment comes from Pastor Josh Anderson.] This is what Paul seems to have in mind in Ephesians 5:19 when he tells us to address "one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

And how we minister to others by our presence is different for every person. When we sing, it may be that you have a beautiful voice that lifts the other person up in worship. Or, if you aren't the best singer, it may be a reminder to them that the Lord receives our worship not for its perfection, but for the love that is behind it – both God's love for us, and our love for him.

That may be the ministry you offer to others. But it also may be the ministry you need to receive from others. Maybe it's been a dark week, and you need to hear not just the aggregate voice of the congregation in song – as beautiful and important as that is – but maybe you need the beautiful voice of someone behind you to lift your spirit. Or maybe it's been a week where you feel like your efforts have repeatedly fallen short. And you need the off-key but enthusiastic singing of someone in the pew next to you to remind you what it is that the Lord most values.

And this goes beyond our singing. Think of the way others might minister to you during the sermon. Maybe you need the example of the person to your right who is paying such close attention to the sermon, to inspire you to do the same. Or maybe you need the example of the person to your left, who is clearly struggling with falling asleep during the sermon, but every time their head jerks back up, they refocus again and try their best, and it reminds you that your listening doesn't have to be perfect, you just need to keep trying again after each time you get distracted or start to nod off. Or maybe you need the example of the person in the pew in front of you who is wrestling with a wiggly child for the entire sermon, to remind you that it's not the end of the world if your own kid is wiggly too, and that even here, your ministry to them is probably more important than hearing every word that I say.

We could go on and on. But both in worship, and outside of worship, the Lord has given us community. And he is at work, in us and among us, ministering through us to others, and ministering through others to us. Our calling is to show up, to dig deeper into community, and to look for the Lord's work and the Lord's calling.

How do you need to more deeply root yourself in Christian community – both in worship and outside of worship?

Conclusion

We've talked this morning about a lot of different ways that the Lord works. And we've particularly considered how the Lord works and draws close to us in concrete ways – in incarnate ways: in ways that take on flesh.

And that should not surprise us, because we have an incarnate God. That is, after all, one of the distinguishing marks of our God, as Christians.

Contrary to the god of so much modern and postmodern spirituality, our God did not make us, set the world spinning and then leave us to find him ourselves – whether through our own reasoning or our own emotions. Rather, the Bible tells us that our God reached out to us, and he pursued us long before we ever pursued him.

And when our God pursued us, he didn't, like the god of Islam, just send us a written message and keep his distance. Our God did not just send us information. He sent us himself – he gave us himself. He came, God the Son, in the flesh, in the incarnation, to dwell among us, and to save us.

And even then, he didn't, like so many pagan gods, take on an incarnate form temporarily, for his own benefit. Rather, he took on a human body and a human soul forever, and he did it to minister to us. God the Son will forever have a human body and human soul – he will forever be incarnate. He is incarnate now in heaven, and he will be incarnate when he dwells with us in the new heavens and the new earth. And he took on human flesh not out of selfish motivations, but to draw close to us, and to give himself for us as a sacrifice – to be the firstborn of the resurrected creation.

Our God is a God of incarnate ministry. And so it should not surprise us that even now, by the Holy Spirit, he ministers to us in concrete, incarnate ways – in ways that take on human flesh: Through sending us Tychicuses and Onesimuses. Through giving us stories, and rooting us in real-life Christian community.

This is how our God ministers to us. Let us have eyes to see it, and hearts to receive it with thanks, that the Lord may continue to work in us and among us.

Amen.

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This sermon draws on material from:

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