

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 1: 11-18
SECOND LESSON: Colossians 2:6-15
July 24, 2022

“Freedom of Thought”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

If you have never been part of an independent charismatic or Pentecostal church the message in this passage today from Colossians might feel very foreign to you. If you have, it could feel all too familiar. Since I have experienced a wide variety of churches and theology in my life-time, I can recognize it.

There is a tendency among some traditions to emphasize mystical experiences above the more mundane fruits of the Spirit. The people who have visions are revered. Those who claim to be prophets are treated with great respect. Everyone better know how to speak in tongues and everyone should also aspire to “the greater gifts”. Miracles are expected every Sunday and some people even go from church to church, tiring of each one in turn as they fail to meet an elusive standard. Those who see visions are ranked a lot higher by fellow members and considered far more “spiritual” than those who humbly clean up the kitchen after events. So of course, everyone wants to be the person who sees visions.

It is a very short jump from there to being coached into adopting excessive spiritual disciplines in order to achieve a closer walk with God, a closer walk with God being identified as having mystical experiences. I once heard a preacher in a Pentecostal church in Scotland speak about doing 40-day fasts. Interestingly, he was an American guest preacher. Fasting is an ancient spiritual discipline. Fasting for 40 days verges on the insane. But there are always some people who are more “out there” with their ideas. Some claim to see angels and demons everywhere. And here is the irony of all this. Spiritual warfare is real. But the people who write instruction manual books on how to take Satan down are just making it up as they go along. They have started to believe their own press. We can share experiences with one another, but any time we think that knowing the right formula or correct words is the important thing we are no longer talking about genuine faith but have moved into magical thinking. There’s no “How to beat the devil in 5 easy steps.” A five-year-old with faith can do it, and she doesn’t require any special words or insider knowledge. God good—devil bad. Period. My late dog Zack had more spiritual discernment than a lot of people. If Zack growled at someone, I knew to pay attention, and there were a few times when he would physically place

his body between me and another person and not let them near. I learned to trust his judgment, *but we didn't put him on Session!*

Paul tackled the issues the Colossians were struggling with in an orderly fashion. First, he says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ." All of these ideas floating around had more to do with human ego and imagination than reality. At their source they were corrupt.

The Colossians were living in a world full of strange competing religious ideas. To a certain extent that is true today as well, although in this part of the country the "hollow" and "deceptive" philosophies are probably found more in political conspiracy theories, pop psychology and online financial gurus, all of which claim to be the source of all truth and the solution to all our problems. Anyone or anything that claims to have all the answers, doesn't. But it is not as easy to keep our thought world free from becoming entangled as we think, because ideas float. Staying grounded takes focus.

Verse 8 says, "8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy . . ." but the word for "take captive" really means to defraud. It means to be conned. And connen abound in our world. I have been conned out of money, and many of you have been too. I have been conned out of time and energy, trying to care for people who in the end have turned out to be pathological liars. (That, by the way, turns out to be a common pastoral experience, because people in need always come to us, and we don't turn them away.) But the face people present is not always what they are. Paul urges us to keep our eyes open and to question. We want to think the best of everyone, but there are those selling falsehood. Howard Camping managed to persuade people that the world was going to end and to sell all their possessions and invest the money in huge billboards warning people that the world was going to end. Howard Camping is now dead, the world is still here, and those poor unfortunate people had to start over.

Paul also addresses the issue of the "fullness" of God, or as we said last week, the *pleroma* in Greek. The false teachers created a variety of speculative theology about the *pleroma*, but the *pleroma* is not a mystic space. This fullness of God lives in bodily form in Jesus and therefore lives in us. **We don't have to keep trying to get what we already have.**

Paul tackles those who say that circumcision is required by saying that baptism essentially replaces circumcision. Furthermore, God forgave all our sins in Christ. As a victorious Roman general paraded those he conquered in chains in a grand public spectacle called a Triumph, so God makes a public spectacle of all worldly and spiritual forces of evil. He triumphs over them through the cross. The irony of this is profound, because crucifixion was itself the fate of those who rebelled against Rome.

Finally, Paul returns to where he began, urging these ordinary members of the church not to be intimidated by those who would judge them on the basis of what they ate or drank or how they observed festivals and celebrations. *Don't be impressed by people who talk at length about their visions, he said, or who worship angels, and who pretend to be humble but are anything but.*

It is the “super-spiritual” crowd versus everyone else, which is basically just a different version of the high school “super-popular” crowd versus everyone else. It’s insider-outsider, “in the know” and “on the fringes.” In high school breaking into this crowd is difficult. You have to look the part and sound the part. You need to have rich parents. Doing just enough drugs to look cool but not enough to land you in rehab is also helpful. But if by chance someone did manage to break into that inner circle what they would discover is that it is all based on illusion anyway. The elites are no happier, no more successful, and no more secure than anyone else.

Those who use so called “spiritual” credentials to increase their status live with the same level of insecurity as those who seek popularity in other ways. The pressure is on to keep producing miracles and prophetic messages from God. But God does not operate according to human timetables and does not do things to support our egos. The kingdom of God runs on quite different principles. This should make us even more wary of those events promising “miracles every night” while the revival is in town!

I realize that this congregation is Presbyterian and not Pentecostal, therefore the vulnerabilities are not quite the same, but we are all susceptible to being defrauded by false beliefs. There is always someone out there ready to sell us a new idea, or a new solution to all our problems. People never tire of writing self-help books. But we don’t have to fall for it. We can stay grounded in Christ. We can remember that Jesus said the first will be last, and the true leader of all is the servant of all. If you really want to seek wisdom, talk to the person who humbly cleans up the kitchen after events, not whoever is in the spotlight. Amen.

Isaiah 1: 11-18

11 “The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the Lord.

“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;

I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

12 When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?

13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.

14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals
I hate with all my being.

They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

15 When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.

17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

18 “Come now, let us settle the matter,”
says the Lord.

“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.

Colossians 2:6-19

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, **7** rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, **10** and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. **11** In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, **12** having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, **14** having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. **15** And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. **17** These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. **18** Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. **19** They have lost connection with the head, from whom

the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews,
grows as God causes it to grow.