

Sunday, November 24, 2013

“I myself will gather my people”: “Christ is before all things and in him all things hold together”

Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Colossians 1:7

Now you know why I desire to be a person of transparency and integrity among you

– I am trying to avoid this kind of judgment upon me, again.

I say “again” because this is the judgment I put upon myself when I left the pastorate in 1993, believing that I had done harm in the way I was pastoring

- pastoring in ways I thought I was advancing the role of the church in the world,
- but I regarded the people I was serving as secondary to accomplishing the mission of the church.

There are, I believe, still too many pastors today who fall prey to a way of pastoring that abuses their role as “shepherds of God’s people.”

The temptation is there.

Even the way many of us have been educated leads us into such temptation.

We have come to believe that leading the church is about our leadership

And we forget,

or fail to fully remember,

that it is the Spirit of God who is the One who gathers God’s people,

that it is Christ who is the primary shepherd, who takes hold of us, holds us together, and leads and transforms us.

In understanding Jesus as the Chief Shepherd, I have come to understand my role as pastor in a very different way.

For me pastoring is to:

- discern,
- discover, and
- encouraging us to follow after Jesus
- relying upon the presence of the Spirit to lead us.

And I am discovering that God’s people are hungry for another way to be pastored by their pastors.

I have been sharing the story of North Suburban with a number of people and I am witnessing an odd response.

When I talk about the way North Suburban has given me space to pastor

– seeking to practice a way of servanthship among you,

I am hearing people literally sigh

– saying, “O that sounds so nice,” as they contrast the kind of leadership being exercised in their contexts.

It is not easy being a shepherd

- and if it were up to me to take the lead in leading God’s people
- well, I am the first to admit,
- **we’d all be lost!**

But our text reveals that our hope does not lie in the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of pastors, pastoral teams, church boards, leadership, etc.

God says to us: “I myself will gather my people!”

God is the One who comes to us

- and gathers us.

This is a real hope that shapes our lives.

And on this Sunday before Thanksgiving,

- we can express thanksgiving to God for not leaving us alone, nor forsaking us,

Being the one who comes to us, and gathers us.

And in being gathered by God, we are:

- healed, led,
- and we are held together.

When I think of Jesus as the Shepherd who leads us, who leads me,

- numerous images come to mind.

I think of the image of Matthew 11 wherein we are invited by Jesus to be yoked together with him (explain)

- Jesus teaches us how to walk in his ways, as we walk with him.

And I also think of Colossians 1.

There is a lot of language which describes how we are strengthened when we are to be found in Christ Jesus.

Yet, it is verse 17 that gets me all excited:

“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

For me, this is the place where I am at home in God’s presence.

No matter what’s going on in my life – this confession comforts and strengthens me.

I am not alone, God is with me and my life is held together by God.

I have no desire ever

- to be any where else.

Commentators usually express that this statement regarding Jesus relates to his pre-existence

- and that he is the One who has created and holds all creation together.

Though this is good theology, good theology always does not translate into the stuff of real life until it encounters us in our daily life situations as the people of God.

So how does this confession help me live, help us live, knowing that the best place for me to be is in the presence of God who has gathered me?

If Christ is before all things

- he is before all things in my life
- before all things that I am and will encounter in my life.

In confessing that “Christ is before all things” I realize that I do not go into any experience alone or by myself

- Christ is already there, ahead of me, before me,
- WITH me!

There is no place I can be apart from God (except perhaps in my own perceptions),

And, even when I think that I am apart from God or God is far from me, God is indeed with me

– God is always there with me.

And if “in him all things hold together”

- I realize that though many things in my life could fall apart;
- I cannot keep all my life under control, juggling all that is important,
- I cannot hold my life together

Yet, rather than worrying about what I am unable to do

- I begin to find rest for my soul, my life, not only in being yoked together with Christ, but realizing that He is the One who holds me and my life together,
- He is the One who holds together what is all slipping through my hands
- And, amazingly, in giving my life to God, who holds me together,
- I discover that in God is where I find my courage, my strength.

This God who gathers me into the community of God is also the One who holds me together!

And what is even more significant in all this: “because Christ is the head of the Body,” because Christ is our Chief Shepherd,

We are included in the Story and Vision of what God is up to in the world.

We are ones who not only experience being in Christ, but we are the community being held together by him,

This enables us to live with courage in our world,

- demonstrating the reality of God’s life and love in the midst of all we are and do.

I guess that is also how you have given me space to pastor among you.

This is also how I pray among you.

My primary desire as I walk with you, is for us to fully receive what it is for us to be God’s gathered community, for us to live out the reality that we are held together by God.

So as we walk together as a people gathered by God and held together by God,

May we encourage each other in our following after Christ, to see that Christ Jesus is in us, before us, beside us, above us, below us

– for us to give witness to this confession: “he is before all things, and in him all things; we are held together.”