

Colossians 1:15-29
July 18, '10

“WHO’S IN FIRST?”

YOU MAY HAVE MISREAD THE SERMON TITLE WHEN YOU SAW IT IN THE BULLETIN OR ON THE SIGN OUTSIDE.

“WHO’S *ON* FIRST?” IS WHAT IMMEDIATELY COMES TO MIND, ISN’T IT – THE FAMOUS ABBOTT & COSTELLO BASEBALL ROUTINE.

I RECENTLY READ A PARODY OF THAT ROUTINE ABOUT A GUY WHO’S CHECKING OUT DVD’S AT A MOVIE RENTAL STORE.

HE ASKS THE CASHIER WHEN HIS MOVIE IS DUE & THE GIRL RESPONDS “*THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW.*”

THE GUY SAYS, “THAT’S RIGHT. WHEN’S IT DUE BACK?”

“THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW.”

“YES, WHEN IS IT DUE?”

WELL, OF COURSE, THE MOVIE THE GUY WAS RENTING WAS “*THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW.*”

HE WAS ALSO RENTING “*48 HOURS,*” “*BEFORE SUNRISE,*” “*BEFORE SUNSET,*” “*7,*” & “*10*” AND, OF COURSE, WANTED TO KNOW WHEN THEY WERE DUE & YOU CAN IMAGINE THE CONFUSION *THAT* CAUSED.

WELL, THIS MORNING, WE’RE NOT TALKING ABOUT “WHO’S *ON* FIRST.”

WE’RE TALKING ABOUT “WHO’S *IN* FIRST.”

BEING IN FIRST PLACE IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE TO US, ISN’T IT?

IT DOESN’T TAKE VERY LONG BEFORE WE FORGET WHO ENDED UP SECOND IN ANY COMPETITION.

NAME THE LAST 5 LOSERS OF THE SUPER BOWL OR WORLD SERIES OR NBA FINALS OR STANLEY CUP FINALS.

WHO FINISHED SECOND THIS YEAR IN THE INDIANAPOLIS 500 OR KENTUCKY DERBY.

EVEN IN POLITICS, SOME WOULD HAVE DIFFICULTY NAMING THE LOSING CANDIDATE IN THE LAST 5 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

BEING FIRST IS ALL THAT MATTERS.

AS VINCE LOMBARDI IS OFTEN QUOTED AS SAYING, “*WINNING ISN’T EVERYTHING. IT’S THE ONLY THING.*”

BUT THEN YOU HEAR SOMETHING LIKE THE STORY OF COLLEGE SOFTBALL PLAYERS LIZ WALLACE & MALLORY HOLTMAN WHO HELPED AN OPPOSING PLAYER AROUND THE BASES WHEN SHE HIT HER FIRST HOME RUN, BUT INJURED HER KNEE WHEN SHE CROSSED FIRST BASE.

IT COST THEIR TEAM, NOT ONLY THE GAME, BUT A CHANCE TO PLAY IN THE COLLEGE SOFTBALL PLAYOFFS.

THERE’S NOT MUCH QUESTION AS TO WHICH ACT WILL STAY WITH THEM THE LONGEST – PLAYING IN THE PLAYOFFS OR DOING SOMETHING THAT RECEIVED NATIONAL ATTENTION & IS THE SUBJECT OF BILLBOARDS AROUND THE COUNTRY AS A LESSON IN SPORTSMANSHIP.

IT'S HARD, THOUGH, ISN'T IT TO AVOID FOCUSING ON THE GOAL OF BEING NUMBER ONE – THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF WINNING – THE DESIRE TO BEAT EVERYONE ELSE NO MATTER WHAT IT TAKES TO DO SO?

I RECALL A VERY UNFLATTERING EPISODE IN MY BRIEF & UNEVENTFUL ATHLETIC CAREER THAT EVENTUALLY TAUGHT ME THERE'S SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN WINNING & BEING FIRST.

OF ALL THE IMAGES I HAVE IN MY MIND OF DAYS WHEN I PLAYED HOCKEY, THERE IS ONE THAT STANDS OUT.

I WAS A GOALIE & IT WAS AN IMPORTANT GAME.

WE WERE AHEAD BY A GOAL IN THE THIRD PERIOD.

THERE WAS A SCRAMBLE IN FRONT OF THE NET, SOMEONE TOOK A POKE AT THE PUCK & KNOCKED IT OVER THE GOAL LINE.

I IMMEDIATELY THRUST MY GLOVE ON TOP OF THE PUCK & PULLED IT OUT.

THE REFEREE BLEW THE WHISTLE & SIGNALLED NO GOAL.

THE IMAGE I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER IS LOOKING UP & INTO THE FACE OF GARY FARIA – THE OPPOSING PLAYER WHO HAD TAKEN THE SHOT.

HIS EYES MET MINE & I'LL NEVER FORGET THAT LOOK.

IT WAS A LOOK THAT SAID, *"I'D EXPECT THAT FROM SOMEONE ELSE DENNIS, BUT NOT YOU."*

WE WON THE GAME BUT I LOST A LOT OF SELF-RESPECT IN THE PROCESS & I STARTED TO REALIZE THERE'S SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN WINNING – SOMETHING BETTER THAN BEING FIRST.

WHEN WE LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE IN COLOSSIANS, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT BEING FIRST IN A WHOLE DIFFERENT WAY, BUT THERE *IS* A CONNECTION.

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS IS PERHAPS THE STRONGEST AFFIRMATION OF THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST THAT WE FIND IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE.

IT'S NOT THE LONGEST OF PAUL'S LETTERS, NOR IS IT THE SHORTEST.

IT'S NOT WRITTEN TO THE BELIEVERS IN AN IMPORTANT & PROMINENT CITY.

IT'S NOT WRITTEN TO A CHURCH ESTABLISHED BY PAUL.

IN FACT, PAUL NEVER VISITED THE CHURCH IN COLOSSAE.

BUT HE KNOWS OF THE CHURCH & HE KNOWS OF A CONTROVERSY THAT EXISTS WITHIN IT.

IT'S A CONTROVERSY AS RELEVANT AS TOMORROW'S HEADLINES.

IT'S A CONTROVERSY ABOUT CHRIST – WHO HE WAS & WHAT HE DID & WHERE HE STANDS AMONG THE WORLD'S RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

THERE WERE THOSE IN COLOSSAE WHO SUGGESTED HE WAS A GREAT MAN – ONE OF THE GREATEST MEN WHO EVER LIVED.

HE WAS A PROPHET.

HE WAS SOMEONE SENT FROM GOD.

HE WAS A GREAT TEACHER & A MIRACLE WORKER.

BUT THAT'S WHERE THEY WOULD DRAW THE LINE.

HE WAS NOTHING MORE THAN THAT – NOTHING MORE THAN A GREAT MAN, A PROPHET SENT FROM GOD WHO TAUGHT WONDERFUL THINGS & PERFORMED EXTRAORDINARY MIRACLES.

JUST AS THEY DREW A LINE – SO DID PAUL.

HE SPEAKS – FROM BEGINNING TO END IN THIS LETTER – ABOUT THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST.

HE IS ALL THOSE THINGS THEY SUGGEST – BUT HE IS MORE.

HE IS GOD INCARNATE.

HE IS GOD LIVING AMONG US.

“WHO’S IN FIRST?”

IT IS JESUS & JESUS ALONE.

THIS IS WHY THIS LETTER & THE CONTROVERSY IT ADDRESSES IS AS RELEVANT AS TOMORROW’S HEADLINES.

IN THE PLURALISTIC AGE & SOCIETY IN WHICH WE LIVE, THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST HAS NEVER BEEN CHALLENGED AS IT IS TODAY.

IT IS NOT AN EASY THING TO CLAIM CHRIST & CHRIST ALONE AS THE SAVIOR OF HUMANITY.

WE DON’T WANT TO SEEM TO BE ARROGANT OR IRRATIONAL OR EXCLUSIONARY OR BIGOTED.

GO BACK FOR A MINUTE, THOUGH, TO THE QUESTIONS WITH WHICH WE BEGAN.

I SUGGESTED MOST OF US WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO REMEMBER WHO WAS SECOND IN ALL THOSE SPORTING CHAMPIONSHIPS.

SOME OF YOU WERE UNDOUBTEDLY THINKING, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘SECOND?’ I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHO FINISHED FIRST!”

AH... THAT’S TELLING, ISN’T IT?

EVEN THOSE IN FIRST ARE ONLY THERE FOR A BRIEF PERIOD OF TIME.

FIRST PLACE CHANGES.

SOMEONE AT THE VERY TOP CAN BE AT THE VERY BOTTOM IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE.

IF YOU DON’T BELIEVE THAT, I’VE GOT 2 NAMES FOR YOU – CLEVELAND CAVALIERS & MEL GIBSON.

HOW QUICKLY THINGS CAN CHANGE!

BUT, YOU SEE, THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IS FOR ALL TIME & FOR ALL AGES & ALL PEOPLE.

THAT’S NOT ARROGANT OR IRRATIONAL OR EXCLUSIONARY OR BIGOTED.

IT’S A PLAIN & SIMPLE FACT.

THAT’S WHAT PAUL IS SAYING HERE IN THESE VERSES.

HE’S TELLING THE COLOSSIANS & HE’S TELLING US THAT JESUS IS GOD & HE IS GOD OF ALL PEOPLE.

HIS TEACHINGS, HIS MIRACLES, HIS SAVING GRACE ARE FOR ALL.

THAT’S WHY PAUL SAYS HERE THAT HE HAS “...*FIRST PLACE IN EVERYTHING.*”

BUT THE QUESTION WE HAVE TO ASK OURSELVES IS, *“DOES HE? DOES JESUS REALLY HAVE FIRST PLACE IN MY LIFE?”*

WE WANT HIM TO, BUT SO MANY OTHER THINGS CROWD IN & TAKE OVER.

IN THE CORRESPONDING GOSPEL READING FOR TODAY, MARTHA IS ANGRY WITH HER SISTER, MARY, FOR LEAVING ALL THE WORK TO HER.

THE ANSWER JESUS OFFERS IS ON THE COVER OF YOUR BULLETIN THIS MORNING – *“THERE IS NEED OF ONLY ONE THING.”*

SINCE I’M NOT PREACHING ON THAT PASSAGE, WE WON’T GET INTO A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE LEGITIMACY OF MARTHA’S ARGUMENT, BUT THE POINT IS – FOCUSING OUR LIVES ON CHRIST, AS MARY DOES, IS THE ONLY THING THAT REALLY MATTERS.

WE GET WORRIED & DISTRACTED BY SO MANY OTHER THINGS, AS JESUS TELLS MARTHA.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE MOVIE *“CITY SLICKERS?”*

IT WAS ABOUT 3 MEN – OLD FRIENDS FOR YEARS – WHO ARE APPROACHING MIDDLE AGE & TRYING TO MAKE THEIR LIVES COUNT FOR SOMETHING.

EVERY YEAR THEY SPEND TIME DOING SOMETHING TOGETHER THAT WILL HELP GET THEM OUT OF THEIR MUNDANE ROUTINES.

THE PLOT OF THE MOVIE REVOLVES AROUND THESE FRIENDS ON A CATTLE DRIVE HELPING A BUNCH OF SEASONED COWBOYS MOVE A HERD OF CATTLE ACROSS THE BIG PLAINS OF THE WEST.

THEY’RE HOPING THAT IN THE PROCESS THEY MIGHT LEARN SOMETHING USEFUL ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE.

IF YOU REMEMBER THE MOVIE, THEN YOU REMEMBER JACK PALANCE’S CHARACTER, CURLY - A CRUSTY OLD COWBOY WHO MEETS ALL OUR STEREOTYPES ABOUT CRUSTY OLD COWBOYS.

BUT IN HIS TOUGH & RUGGED WAY, HE’S ALSO VERY WISE.

IN ONE OF THE MORE SERIOUS SCENES IN THE MOVIE, CURLY IS RIDING ALONGSIDE MITCH, ONE OF THE CITY SLICKERS, PLAYED BY BILLY CRYSTAL.

THE CONVERSATION TURNS PHILOSOPHICAL.

MITCH LOOKS AT CURLY & SAYS WISTFULLY, *“YOUR LIFE MAKES SENSE TO YOU.”*

CURLY REPLIES: *“YOU CITY FOLK. YOU WORRY A LOT. YOU ALL COME UP HERE ABOUT THE SAME AGE. YOU SPEND 50 WEEKS GETTING KNOTS IN YOUR ROPE & YOU THINK 2 WEEKS UP HERE WILL UNTIE THEM FOR YOU. NONE OF YOU GET IT.”*

CURLY PAUSES FOR A MINUTE & THEN SAYS, *“YOU KNOW WHAT THE SECRET OF LIFE IS?”*

MITCH, ON PINS & NEEDLES, SAYS, *“NO. WHAT?”*

AND THEN CURLY SAYS, *“ONE THING. JUST ONE THING. YOU STICK TO THAT, AND EVERYTHING ELSE DON’T MEAN NOTHING.”*

“THAT’S GREAT,” SAYS MITCH, *“BUT WHAT’S THE ONE THING?”*

CURLY LOOKS AT HIM & FINALLY SAYS, *“THAT’S WHAT YOU’VE GOT TO FIGURE OUT.”*

YOU SEE, YOU CAN GET ALL CAUGHT UP IN A MULTITUDE OF THINGS.

YOU CAN BUSY YOURSELF WITH ALL SORTS OF ACTIVITIES.

YOU CAN BECOME OBSESSED WITH WORK OR PLAY OR MAKING MONEY OR MAKING FRIENDS.

YOU CAN LET A DOZEN THINGS TAKE FIRST PLACE – ONE AFTER THE OTHER – FOR YEARS.

BUT NONE OF THOSE THINGS HAS LASTING VALUE.

ONLY YOUR UNDERSTANDING & RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS CHRIST REALLY MATTERS IN THE END.

BECAUSE, YOU SEE, IT’S *THAT* UNDERSTANDING & *THAT* RELATIONSHIP THAT PUTS EVERYTHING ELSE IN PROPER PERSPECTIVE.

GO BACK, FOR JUST A MOMENT, TO MARY & MARTHA.

THE GREAT PREACHER, FRED CRADDOCK, OFFERS AN INSIGHTFUL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DILEMMA WE FACE WHEN LOOKING AT THE TWO OF THEM.

HE SAYS, *“IF WE JUDGE MARTHA TOO HARSHLY, SHE MAY ABANDON SERVING ALTOGETHER.*

“AND IF WE COMMEND MARY TOO PROFUSELY, SHE MAY SIT THERE FOREVER.

“THERE IS A TIME TO GO & DO. THERE IS A TIME TO LISTEN & REFLECT.

“KNOWING WHICH & WHERE IS A MATTER OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT.”

I THINK THAT’S WISE ADVICE.

THERE *ARE* THINGS THAT REQUIRE OUR ATTENTION & OUR TIME & OUR ENERGY.

THOSE THINGS CHANGE OVER THE COURSE OF LIFE.

BUT THEY SHOULD NEVER – EVER – TAKE FIRST PLACE.

ONE OF THE GREATEST THEOLOGIANS OF THE 20TH CENTURY WAS PAUL TILLICH.

HE’S BURIED IN PAUL TILLICH PARK, WHICH IS LOCATED BEHIND “THE RED GERANIUM” IN NEW HARMONY.

LISTEN TO WHAT HE SAID ABOUT THINGS TAKING PRIORITY IN OUR LIVES OVER OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST.

HE SAID, *“THERE ARE INNUMERABLE CONCERNS IN OUR LIVES & IN HUMAN LIFE GENERALLY WHICH DEMAND ATTENTION, DEVOTION, PASSION.*

“BUT THEY DO NOT DEMAND INFINITE ATTENTION, UNCONDITIONAL DEVOTION, ULTIMATE PASSION.

“THEY ARE IMPORTANT – OFTEN VERY IMPORTANT, FOR YOU & ME AND FOR THE WHOLE OF HUMANKIND.

“BUT THEY ARE NOT ULTIMATELY IMPORTANT.”

THE CHALLENGE TO US IS TO UNDERSTAND THAT WHEN WE ALLOW CHRIST – AS PAUL SAYS IN THIS PASSAGE – *“TO HAVE FIRST PLACE IN EVERYTHING”* – THEN ALL OF LIFE BEGINS TO MAKE SENSE & EVERYTHING TAKES ITS PROPER POSITION IN OUR LIVES.

WHEN THAT HAPPENS, YOU BEGIN TO SEE EVERYTHING IN A NEW WAY.

THE PIECES OF THE JIGSAW PUZZLE OF YOUR LIFE BEGIN TO FALL INTO PLACE & THE FULL PICTURE OF WHO YOU ARE & WHAT GOD INTENDS YOU TO BECOME, EMERGES BEFORE YOU.

IT'S A PICTURE OF BEAUTY, PASSION, ENERGY, GRACE & LOVE.

AND, LO & BEHOLD, IT'S A PICTURE OF YOU. AMEN.

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