

“The Fullness of Christ’s Peace, Word and Name”

Colossians 3: 15-17 (NRSV)

Well, the **2010 Vancouver Winter Games** are upon us! The official motto in English is: **“With glowing hearts.”** There is, of course, a not so subtle nod in this phrase in the direction of the next line of our anthem, from which it is taken: **“we see thee rise, the true north, strong and free.”** How many times haven’t we heard it? Canada is expected to **“own the podium”** in these Olympics. The French version of the motto puts it even more bluntly: **“des plus brilliants exploits”** – we expect the most brilliant performance! Although I’m a proud and patriotic Canadian – why, I’ve even bought some gear for our Olympic grandbaby to be born in May -- and I certainly hope for the best from all our athletes, all this hype seems to be a bit unseemly to me and un-Canadian. It puts undue pressure on athletes and huge expectation on us. It makes journalists say stupid things like: “[Jennifer] Heil settles for silver.” (“The Globe and Mail” – internet headline this morning.) Why, she won silver! Whatever happened to celebrating the best of the youth of every country? The **original motto** for all the Olympics suggests there is something for everyone in each of these games. Every athlete strives to be **“swifter, higher and stronger.”** Certainly, we want our athletes to do their best, but isn’t it all about participating in the games, not necessarily winning in them, that really matters?

But let’s come back down to earth. Paul’s third chapter in Colossians deals with the **pleasurable incentives** which come to the child of God who has **put off the old self and put on the new**. That’s one of our mottos. That’s what Christians are expected to be and to do. Specifically, in this instance, these incentives talk about finding the fullness of Christ’s peace (3:15), the fullness of his word (3:16), and the fullness of his name (3:17). **R. E. O. White**, a British preacher, observed this about “the fullness” to which these verses allude: **“The surest sign you’re carrying a full bucket of water is wet feet.”** That’s true isn’t it? Whenever we attempt to carry a full bucket of water to clean the floor or to wash the car, we always get our feet wet! If you want to be involved you will have to get your feet wet. When our lives are full of good things, of the things of Christ, they will **overflow**.

1. The fullness of Jesus Christ’s peace (Col. 3:15).

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body” (3:15).

I remember **one of the first times I experienced this peace**. I was part of a vibrant young people's group in my home church, St. Paul's Presbyterian, in Ottawa, Ontario. We had many good times together. But among the best times were times away at Camp Iawah, located out in the hardwood forests, halfway between Ottawa and Kingston. The camp's name was an acrostic, based on the first letters of each of the words of the opening phrase of a text in Proverbs: "**In all ways acknowledge him...**" (3:6). It was a great place for our annual fall and, sometimes, winter, retreat. We usually had a special speaker, lots of good food and lots of outdoor fun. Here I discovered many things about the Christian faith, which I was learning, more and more, to make my own. I still remember the aroma of the great room of the beautiful log structure in which we gathered to listen to talks, the smell of the wood crackling in the fireplace, the colours of autumn or winter outside, and the strange, yet wonderful, feeling of the fullness of Christ's peace surrounding and enveloping me. I was at peace with God and the world!

"The peace of Christ" is different from any other kind of peace. In the brief hours before he was betrayed and crucified, Jesus said to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (Jn. 14:27). He gives us a special peace, which he calls, "my peace." He gives us **his own personal peace**. It's not just the peace we experience when there is no conflict. It's more positive than that. It's a sense of wholeness and well-being, of harmony, and of being complete. But it's even more. It is **the calming presence of Christ in all circumstances**. It was his presence that was with the disciples after his resurrection. It was his presence that I experienced in Camp Iawah, and on other occasions since. It is this experience of peace: the cessation of hostility with God, a sense of wellbeing, and the sense of his presence that has marked my life.

What are we to do with this peace? "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (3:15a). What does that mean? **F. F. Bruce**, the New Testament scholar to whom we owe so much, says "**rule**" carries the idea of "**arbitrate**" (1957, p. 281). In some extra-biblical Greek references, it refers to the function of one who takes it upon himself/herself to **decide what is right in a contest**, say like in the Olympic Games. The sense here is, "Let the peace of Christ be the umpire in your hearts amidst the contests, conflicts, and clashing opinions that you will find present in many situations. Let the peace of Christ be your advisor, your counsellor."

A story comes from **the Salvation Army**. A rather strong-willed woman on the street was nicknamed **“Warrior Brown”** because of her fiery temper. She was often belligerent and became enraged whenever she was drunk. Then, one day, after she became a Christian, her entire life became suddenly, wonderfully changed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. At a meeting some weeks later she told everyone what Jesus had done for her. Unexpectedly, another scoffer, who knew her from the street, threw a potato at her, causing a stinging bruise. Had she not been converted she would’ve given the man a piece of her mind and even her fist. God’s grace, however, had made such a profound change in her demeanor that she quietly picked up the potato and put it into her pocket without saying a word. No more was heard of the incident until the time of the “harvest festival” months later. Then the dear woman known as “Warrior Brown” brought her offering of a sack of potatoes. She explained that after the meeting in which she had been hit with the potato, she’d cut up and planted **the “insulting potato”** and what she was now presenting to the Lord was **the “increase.”** This woman had allowed “the peace of Christ” to be the adjudicator of her life.

How much misery we would avoid if we permitted “the peace of Christ” to adjudicate in our hearts! How many words we would hold back. How many sleepless nights we would forego. How the church needs this too, since to this “indeed you were called as one body” (3:15b).

Paul ends this first section of his exhortation in verse 15 by saying, **“And be thankful”** (3:15c), a command also repeated in different ways in verses 16 and 17. When the buckets we carry are so full of Jesus Christ’s love (3:14), our lives will be bathed with the peace of God in such a way that they **overflow with thanksgiving.**

2. **The fullness of Jesus Christ’s word** (Col. 3:16).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God” (3:16).

The words of Christ have been enshrined in the Word of God. They are found in the New Testament of our Bible. **How can we allow the Word of God to “dwell richly” among us?** The Bible is not all that hard to understand if we **read it**, considering its historical sense, its literary sense, and its general or plain meaning (John Stott, Understanding the Bible, 1972,

p. 206-241), although we must also concede, that there are some difficult passages. **Mark Twain** put the problem of biblical interpretation in perspective when he said, “Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I’ve always noticed that the passages in the Bible which trouble me most are those which I **do** understand.” The Bible is generally understandable to most folks, and we need to read it and apply it. We need to be comforted and troubled by it, as is appropriate to each of our lives. It is no surprise to me, that when I look back over my life, I realize that as I became more serious about my Christian faith, I began to read the Bible more eagerly and regularly.

We must also realize that **reading alone** doesn’t guarantee that “the word of Christ [will] dwell in [us] richly.” A parallel quotation to the one under consideration this morning found in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians lists the same results as long as we allow ourselves to “be filled with the Spirit” (5:18-19). God’s Word must be read and applied **under the influence of the Holy Spirit** if it is to ultimately dwell richly in us. Richness only comes as we meditate deeply upon what we have read and as we allow God’s self to influence us and have his way with us. It isn’t just a matter of disciplined study. As with the preparation of Olympic athletes in whatever contest they seek to compete, it is a matter of the heart. It is a Spirit-driven passion. It is a Spirit-filled participation in the life of Christ and his Word.

And is it ever rich! As I began to read my Bible more faithfully, starting in the year of our Lord, 1961 -- using a King James Version, no less, and the help of dated, daily **Scripture Union Notes**, underlining and memorizing whole passages, my experience of **this richness** accorded perfectly with how Paul says God’s Spirit will manifest himself: I began to be a better **interpreter** of Scripture and a better **teacher** of Scripture. I actually had **something useful to say** as I was given opportunity to lead our young people’s group, and later, various Intersarsity Christian Fellowship groups during my university years, as well as student ministry” opportunities in Saskatchewan in 1968 and 1969, and Ontario in 1970. Gradually, Christian music -- “hymns, psalms and spiritual songs” -- all three kinds became a pleasure to me. I would often sing some of these songs to myself as I was walking or driving somewhere. I still do that today. Whenever the Word of God gets into your soul, you find you need to sing (even if you don’t sing very well.)

I guess this accounts for **Tertullian's** second-century description of a Christian love feast at which, "... **each is invited to sing to God** in the presence of the others from his or her own heart" (F. F. Bruce, p. 284). **Imagine the early church's worship.** One got up in the meetings and sang, perhaps from a psalm, and another answered antiphonally. Hymns, like the piece now enshrined in Philippians 2:5-11, broke forth in hearty chorus. Others sang a new song, spontaneously, about what God had done. There was music in their hearts and on their lips. That is what this verse is talking about. You can find this repeated in church history again and again. Whenever reformation or renewal breaks out, new psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are sung. When the word of God dwells richly within you, **you want to sing "with gratitude in your hearts ... to God."** Someone has said, "music is the window of the soul." How is it with your soul?

When we buried Herb Friesen over a week ago at the Hazelwood Cemetery, Rick's wife, **Mei-Yun (known as Maggie)** asked if she could sing a song at the graveside. It was a beautiful song taken from Psalm 27. She sang it in her native tongue, Chinese. It was hauntingly beautiful to listen to her sing.

The ability **to give instruction** "with all wisdom" **and appropriate admonition**, as well as **to sing a variety of songs** which honour our Lord, are tell-tale signs of Christ's richly indwelling Word.

3. **The fullness of Christ's name** (Col. 3:17).

"And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

There are few exhortations in all of Scripture that are more comprehensive than this one. **"Word and deed" take in everything in life.** Think of it. Our **"deeds"** can be preaching, teaching, eating, drinking, exercising, gardening, driving, cleaning house, shopping, visiting, working, playing (winter or summer sports), fishing, even just sitting and watching – everything! Our **"words"** are everything that passes our lips, even in unguarded moments. Everything we say or do is to be done "in the name of the Lord Jesus." And, of course, when we speak in that name, with Christ's spirit, we may watch what we say more carefully!

Just a few sinful acts or words can disgrace the greatest of names. The Hebrew name, **"Judah"** means "God's praise"; the New Testament

equivalent is “**Judas**” and you and I know what that name now forever implies. Similarly, I wonder how the name **Tiger Woods**, once bespeaking marvelous achievement and integrity, holds up these days. But, when our lives are full of **Christ Jesus**, praise to his name in our words and our deeds floods our paths, bringing refreshment to all. What responsibility is ours!

The fullness of Christ comes from an overflow of **his peace** and **his word** and **his name** on our lips and in our lives.

It is also seen in our **thankfulness**. Verse 15 says: “**And be thankful.**” Paul’s sense is this: “Become thankful.” “Keep on striving for a deeper gratitude than you have yet attained.” Verse 16 implies: Let Christ’s peace reign, let Christ’s word reign, and let Christ’s name reign in you “**with gratitude in your hearts ... to God.**” Verse 17 repeats the message: Do whatever you do and say whatever you say, **always “giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** Thankfulness is a repeated theme in Scripture. Christians are thankful people. **The basic nature of sin is**, as many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, like **John Calvin** and **Karl Barth**, put it: **ingratitude**. When the Spirit of Christ pervades our lives we become more and more thankful. In spite of life’s curve balls, I don’t know any other way to live, but joyfully, positively, and thankfully. I am thankful that God has given me a thankful heart. I hope that is the basic attitude of your hearts too.

Full pails cannot help but overflow. Sometimes we think that this is just a mess. But consider the beauty and the power of waterfalls and fountains.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
 Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
 February 14, 2010