**Grace in Christ**

**(The Tapestry of Grace)**

**Text: Colossians 2:6-19**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I love tapestries and quilts and anything with intricate patterns that are woven together. I admire the artistic beauty. And I admire the process of making the piece. When a group of women get together for a quilting bee, it’s a wonderful example of community: where gifts are shared and resources are pooled and neighbors support and encourage one another.

Look at this beautiful tapestry on the screen. Look at the amazing pattern. Think about all the threads that it took to make that pattern. Each thread is important. But each thread by itself does not a tapestry make. They have to be woven together. And once they are, what has been created is greater than the sum of its parts. As important as each thread is, it’s the entire tapestry that’s so amazing.

This tapestry reflects something of what Paul means when he speaks of living “in Christ.” He writes to the Colossians, “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives *in* him” (Colossians 2:6).

Living in Christ. It’s a phrase that Paul frequently uses. He means that we – all of us – have been woven together in Christ. It’s not so much that Christ lives in us as that we live in him. We don’t exist on our own, we don’t serve on our own, we don’t believe on our own. All that we are, all that we do, all the faith that we have, we have in Christ.

I want to talk today and next Sunday about what it means to live “in Christ.” I want to talk about the grace that weaves us together into the cosmic fabric of the Risen Lord. I want to talk about the tapestry of grace.

Let’s be clear, first of all, that this tapestry has been around for a long time. This tapestry of Christ, this body of Christ – and, of course, the “body of Christ” is the way that Paul characteristically talks about living “in Christ” – whichever metaphor you use, it’s been around for a long time. You and I and all of us together: we we’re woven into this tapestry in eternity; before the foundation of the world was laid. Last week, in Colossians 1, Paul talked about how our faith in Christ flows from “the hope that has been reserved for you in heaven” (Colossians 1:5). Did you hear that? God has reserved a place for you in heaven. But God made that reservation for you *before* you came to faith in Christ. Your faith flows *from* “the hope that has been reserved for you.” The reservation was made long before you believed; long before you were even conceived! The language reminds us of what Paul writes to the Ephesians, when he says that God “chose us in Christ *before the foundation of the world*” (Ephesians 1:4). Your life in Christ didn’t begin when you first believed in Christ. Your life in Christ didn’t begin when you made the Good Confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Your life in Christ didn’t even begin with your baptism. If it had, that would have made salvation at least partly dependent on your actions; or at least your parents’ actions. But that’s not the way that salvation works. We are saved by grace alone. We live in Christ by grace alone. It is the gracious work of the Master Artist that weaves us together into the fabric of Christ. You, me, all of us, all of humanity: we were woven together in Christ in eternity. It’s all God’s doing. Faith is the means by which we *recognize* what God has already done.

John Newton, in his hymn Amazing Grace writes, “How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.” That doesn’t mean that grace was nowhere to before *until* you first believed. No! God’s grace has embraced you always. But you didn’t *recognize* that grace until you believed; you, me, none of us did. Grace does not appear *to the eyes of your heart* until you believe. You don’t realize how *precious* it is until you believe. But grace doesn’t appear *because* you believe. You *believe* because of *grace*. You believe because God in Christ has *embraced* you. You believe because God in Christ has revealed God’s love to you. And then, perhaps in a moment of dramatic religious conversion, or perhaps in a moment of quiet insight, you experience what has been true all along: that you have *always* been woven into this amazing tapestry that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The preeminent religious experience, cutting across the boundaries of cultures and religions and centuries, is the sense of being one with all things, as if we’re all embraced by one Reality, and part of one fabric. Because we are. The Master Artist has woven us into it.

As Paul says in Colossians 1, “In him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). Or in Colossians 2, Paul speaks of the body, “Held together by its ligaments and sinews” (Colossians 2:19). Either way, we’re all part of a larger whole. We’re all interconnected. Everything is connected.

I appreciate this biblical idea because it’s reflected in our own experience. Let me tell you a few stories:

Last week I was pondering this idea of the connectivity of all things while I was driving. Then I pulled-up behind this car with a bumper sticker. And it said, “Everything is connected.”

Preacher and author Frederick Buechner was out driving one day and he was so depressed that he had to pull over. As he sat there on the shoulder a car drove by with a novelty license plate that said TRUST. It was, as Buechner said, “the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then.” The right word at the right time; because everything is connected.

You all know that we have a Future Story that we’re implementing. Among other things, it calls for establishing new partnerships to better serve our community, creating an organization called Friends of Camp Bedford, and hiring a Camp Manager. Within 2 weeks of reading that story to you all last November 18, some amazing things happened. First, we received inquiries from potential community partners; then, the founding members of what became Friends of Camp Bedford started to get organized; *and* a potential Camp Manager emailed me; right out of the blue! And here’s the thing: none of them knew anything about Our Future Story. None of them had a clue about our dreams. It was one of those marvelous moments of synchronicity, when several things happen that are significantly related, but they *seem* to be caused independently. Well, they weren’t *really* independent, because everything is connected.

I’ll bet that you’ve had experiences like that. It’s just amazing how interconnected things are when we start to pay attention to them. We call them coincidences, but some call them “God-incidences.” It’s the Holy Spirit at work; binding all things together in Christ.

So if everything is connected, if we all live collectively “in Christ,” why do we tend to focus on the individual? Paul would be the first to ask this question, because to focus on the individual is to focus on the old life that was left behind when we found ourselves in Christ. In baptism, we die to our old *self*, that we might be raised to newness of life *in Christ* (see Romans 6:1-11).

So why indeed, especially in this country, are we so focused on the individual; on being the master of my own destiny? There are a lot of other countries whose cultures have been influenced by biblical faith where the emphasis is on *community*; or at least on a balance *between* the individual and the community. Why do we focus on the individual? Partly it’s the frontier experience that so shaped our culture. When you’re living in a log cabin or a sod house, miles from the nearest neighbor, you become very dependent on yourself. Partly it’s the way in which the Enlightenment shaped our thinking. The Enlightenment was the 18th century philosophical movement that stressed individual liberty. It was the philosophy of the Founders who signed the Declaration of Independence. And partly it’s the huge impact that the 2nd Great Awakening had on the shaping of American culture. Between 1800 and 1830 revivals swept across the entire young nation. Individuals and families and communities were transformed by powerful religious experiences. And sometimes the internal dimension of those experiences can be so powerful that it leads to a focus on *my* experience, *my* faith, *my* new life in Christ. Sometimes you come out of such an experience talking about how *I* have accepted Jesus Christ as *my personal* Lord and Savior.

I think it’s especially the influence of the 2nd Great Awakening that helps to account for our cultural tendency to emphasize the individual. Not everyone lived on the frontier, and very few people actually read the Enlightenment philosophers, but the Great Awakening touched most of the nation in one way or another. In 1800 only about 10% of the American population where church members. That number had increased to more than 50% by the Civil War. The Great Awakening had a *huge* impact on our culture.

A powerful religious experience, if not interpreted and nurtured within the supportive context of a community of faith, will leave you with the notion that it’s all about your *personal* relationship with Jesus. But, of course, it’s about so much more than that. Ironically, the immediate response to a religious experience is that you want to hug everyone. You come out of that experience feeling that connection to everyone and everything. But over time, more often than not, it seems like it’s the change *within* you that you remember the most. You remember the experience as a decision that *you* made for Christ, not a decision that *Christ* made for you. You forget about the tapestry, even though, in that moment of conversion, you were profoundly aware of it. We forget especially when we view the conversion experience through the lens of the rugged individualist, through the narrative of the frontier experience, through the Enlightenment philosophy of the autonomous individual and his personal liberty.

A lot of wisdom came out of the Enlightenment. But, in the end, it represents human philosophy, not biblical faith. And Paul warns the Colossians not to be held captive by philosophy, or human tradition. No, Christ alone should hold us captive. Because therein lies perfect freedom.

50 years ago next month, Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon. Imagine if his first words had been “Hey Houston, I just flew my buddy Buzz and me to the moon.” As if he’d done it all himself. Never mind the 410,000 people who were employed in Project Apollo; without whom he never would’ve gotten there. Never mind the family, friends, Scout masters and teachers who encouraged him along the way. All the way down to one Reinhard Kuhlman, the father of my junior choir director, who was Armstrong’s high school math teacher back in Wapakoneta, Ohio. Armstrong didn’t do it alone. It was an intricate, interwoven, community effort.

Now, that takes nothing away from the fact that Armstrong was a brilliant pilot. Especially in the last two minutes of the descent to the lunar surface, when he was searching for a safe place to put down his spacecraft, with the onboard computer threatening to crash and alarms going off; *and*, he was almost out of gas! When Armstrong finally set the LM down on the lunar surface, he had just 21 seconds of fuel left. It takes an exceptional pilot to do that. It takes an exceptional individual to do that. But he never would’ve gotten anywhere near the moon without that community of 400,000 plus people. It was their skill, their commitment, their dedication, along with his, as part of one intricate whole; it was this amazing tapestry of technology and imagination and skill and prayer that brought the Eagle down safely at Tranquility Base and created that one giant leap for humankind.

We live and move and have our being in Christ. We – all of us – live and move and have our being in that Cosmic Tapestry.

One more story and then I’m done. Years ago, I was exploring the Civil War battlefield at Vicksburg, Mississippi. And this butterfly attached itself to my shoulder. As I walked around the battlefield, it stayed there. I brushed it aside, but it didn’t go far. I got in the car and drove to another part of the battlefield, and it attached itself to the hood. I got out at the next stop on the tour, and it followed me again. Well, I just had to marvel at the connection between this butterfly and me and all things. And I exclaimed out loud about the wonder of this magical, mystical universe!

You and I and all things are in Christ. And Christ is in God. And all things are woven together in a marvelous tapestry of grace. A magical, mystical universe indeed! Amen.