

This letter might have been written to New Horizons Presbyterian Church! It contains thanksgiving for a history of faithful ministry and service. Strong leadership and a sense of mission have characterized its outreach and action.

My observation over the last two months reveals a desire to be authentic Christians, disciples of a living Lord. We intend for our lives, individually and corporately to be faithful expressions of the love and grace and justice of God.

We come from many different backgrounds. We hold a large variety of interests. Our life experience is varied. We come together to worship and pray; to reflect on and learn from God's Word; to be sent out into a world that longs for the experience we hold dear.

We are confronted with a world filled with possibilities and options - all calling for our interest and commitment of time and resources. Similar to that young church at Colossae we find ourselves drawn into "work we must do", work that feels like a "calling". We become distracted and preoccupied. We find ourselves pouring energy and resources into committees, and projects and activities that seem to go nowhere.

We feel stuck in the mud - and see nothing to grasp to pull ourselves out. [One of my seminary classmates shared a saying of her grandmother: "When you're stuck in the mud, just stand there. If you wallow around you get in deeper."] When we get stuck in the mud of tradition and practices that no longer nurture or serve we fail to see that our faith priorities have gotten set aside or overlooked.

Paul's letter to the Colossians is directed to that situation. The people of Colossae had received the gospel message. They had claimed it as their own. Other teachers toured the region. Paul discovered that some who had come to Colossae were false teachers - -- more concerned with their own teaching than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This letter says, "Let's refocus. Let's remember the foundation of our faith, Jesus Christ." It is exceedingly appropriate to focus on that today as we consider our path into the future.

Paul's counsel is: "Consider the person of Jesus. Shape response as a community of faith around him." He calls them to "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith" (NRSV). I particularly like contemporary English choice of *rooted* as describing our grounding in faith. Still another rendition of that is: "everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding".

We are rooted in our families, in customs and traditions that shape our lives. I am quietly thrilled as I see my children's families adopting practices and traditions that we carried on as they grew up; very aware that some of those grew out of my own experience as a child.

We are rooted in our communities of origin. Many continue to have ties to childhood or high school friends or plan to join in community celebrations. We hold the experiences we have valued in school or family as the norm. We celebrate and feel affirmed when our home communities move forward with positive developments

We are rooted in faith as well. The heart of this letter has to do with how this rootedness came to be. Taking a deep look at the person of Jesus Christ we are

reminded that he was with God at the creation of the world and all that is. He will be present at the close of the age --- whatever that may turn out to be.

To be rooted is to allow the essence of one's person to spread out; to attach and become bound to the nourishment of the ground or environment in which one lives. To become rooted or grounded in the faith is to engage in the community of faith to be fed and nurtured and grow in understanding and expression of one's belief.

Jesus was sent --- to teach us how to live as God's people; to build the kingdom of God; to make God's purpose and intention real in this world. Jesus' death on the cross was reconciliation for our inability to participate fully in that will and purpose; our separation from God. acted out in sinful behavior, behavior that does not witness to God's grace and love.

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. That is our basic confession of faith. Making that confession marks God's claim on us as God's people. It names us as disciples. It takes persistence and perseverance to keep that statement foremost in one's mind as we move through life's daily tasks. It is not always easy or convenient to speak the truth of one's faith to a particular situation. We fear being misunderstood, or labeled as fanatic. Yet we are called to act.

Discipleship may take the form of quiet, unobtrusive faithfulness: study, prayer, contemplation. Mary gives us a snapshot of this. Discipleship may also take the form of service: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, visiting the prisoner, sheltering the homeless, and all forms of active engagement. That is Martha's understanding. It may also be seen in taking charge, becoming a leader working for justice and peace in all areas of life. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Desmond Tutu.

The message to the early church, and to us today, is to continue to grow from those roots, this grounding. God's will and purpose may become known as we seek direction for the future. That understanding will come as we open ourselves to the discovery of new ways to do church; new ways to express God's grace and mercy in our hurting world. It may come as we discover ways to speak for justice in our communities and nation.

We feel very limited. Our call this day is to trust God's leading as we consider the future of this congregation; to count on God to equip us with strength, energy, patience, endurance and most of all with joy; to accomplish God's purpose for renewal and transformation of our world, giving all glory to God. Amen.