

First Sunday in Lent / Vietnam Mission Work – March 10, 2019

Colossians 1:3-6

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

This is not how Pastor Ham expected to help his people. After all, how could he help if he was in prison? Pastor Ham was a Hmong village leader in Northern Vietnam. Before he became a Christian, he was a village shaman, someone his neighbors believed could tell the future, and someone people trusted to help with funerals of their loved ones. But Ham knew it was a lie. Even as he would put on the show of a shaman his words were empty and could bring no hope. The gifts of meat and money the poor people from his village would bring for his services became a heavier and heavier weight on his conscience. He wanted to help, but he knew that would mean something had to change. That is what led him to explore a new teaching he heard on a Christian radio broadcast. He traveled to a nearby village to find out more about Jesus. And he believed.

Pastor Ham went back to his village to tell others what he had heard and soon a church began to gather. This scared the officials in power at the time and they threw this new convert in prison. Over the next several years Ham would be interrogated, beaten and isolated in an attempt to get him to renounce his new faith. It must have all been confusing for this new Christian. He had hoped to help his people and he was not about to give up his new confidence, but he was in prison. His people that were gathering as a church were in danger. How could he help if he was stuck, alone and beaten in jail? He did not realize it at the time, but even though he was behind bars, true help had arrived. God was there in his village. Grace had arrived and the gospel was at work.

This would all have sounded familiar to the apostle Paul. He spent years in prison because he would not give up his faith in Christ. The words of our text come from a letter that Paul wrote while he was in prison in Rome. Enemies in Jerusalem had convinced the local authorities to lock Paul up for trying to undermine the Jewish faith. Local officials looking for bribes from Paul and the good will of people they needed to control kept him locked up for years. Paul finally appealed as a Roman citizen to the emperor in Rome. It is during his house arrest in Rome that Paul became aware of a problem among a Christian group he had never visited. A new church in Colosse was in danger. False teachers were trying to rob the people of the confidence of salvation through Christ alone. Dangerous ideas about needing to add works to truly earn salvation or to rely only on what human wisdom could comprehend threatened heaven itself for these people. But how could Paul help if he was stuck, alone and beaten in jail?

Paul knew exactly how to help. He sent a letter to the Colossians that would turn their focus back on Christ alone. These opening words of Paul's letter reveal his confidence for the Colossians: "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same

way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace” (vv. 3-6).

Paul, the prisoner, knew that help did not come from his presence among them, but from the power of the gospel of Christ. Paul reminded them to stick to what they already knew. On the day the gospel came to them with all the power of God behind it, they had truly understood that they were saved as a free gift from God, there were no strings attached. They truly understood God’s grace. Even though Paul had yet to meet this gathering of believers he knew the power of God’s promises. He knew that the gospel that had come to them would continue to bear fruit among them just as it was doing throughout the whole world.

During Pastor Ham’s time in prison he did not yet have that same confidence. For years he dedicated his life to help his people who were also under fierce persecution and at times had to retreat for worship under the cover of the jungle. But the help he could provide was limping. He had yet to truly understand God’s grace that comes from the clear, simple and earth-shattering power of the gospel.

That has now changed. Through contact with WELS mission workers, Pastor Ham and many other leaders from the Hmong Fellowship Church of Vietnam are being led to truly understand God’s grace for the first time. This is how Pastor Ham describes what has happened: “Personally, since I have been receiving training from the WELS, I see a change in myself as well. Before this, I taught and used my own authority in the church. At that time, I thought, ‘I’m the smart one – I’m the one with training, and I am the one with the authority. I can force my members to do the right thing.’ But since I have been studying with the Lutheran Church, I have changed. I have reevaluated myself and how I taught in the past – and know that I have taught false teachings. The training made me value my members more – and know that they need the gospel. I used to use the law to motivate my members. That was how I showed my authority. But since receiving this training, I now understand that the law won’t help the members. I started to share the gospel and taught them to understand that the gospel will motivate you to love and show care for each other.”

Pastor Ham has come to the experts and is asking for help to train his church that now numbers over 100,000 members. He has appealed to all of us as the experts. This may startle you, but we are the experts who are just what this world needs. The truth about grace is one that we know well. In fact, in comparison to the vast majority of the world we are *experts* in this truth. And that is not because we are better than anyone else. We know who we are. We know what we deserve from God without his help and what we would be able to accomplish apart from God. Even our best days are spoiled by the evil thoughts that go through our heads and the unkind words that sometimes slip from our lips and the self-centered outlook that is our default view of the world. When we are honest and realize our hearts are an open book to God, we know what we deserve. God would have been more than right to kick us aside for an eternity in hell. But we also know the amazing and unexpected thing God has done. He sent his Son for us. He made him suffer in our place. He put him to death so that we can live. These are not truths anyone could expect. But we thank God that at some time someone told us, “God forgives you because of what Jesus has done. You will be with Jesus forever in heaven. God will not treat you as your sins deserve.” And that is how God has made us experts in grace.

We are experts in a world that will be lost without this truth. The story of Pastor Ham is just one of billions that could be told. There are billions of people in this world who do not believe in Jesus and so are headed to hell. They need what we know. It might be easy to think, “I know they need what I have, but Vietnam is a long way from here.” Don’t sell God short. He has

chosen you and made you a part of his Kingdom. He has designed you and every member of his Church to spread this news to every nation. Look at the children sitting with us this morning. Think about how many countries in this world just those sitting in this room might visit one day. Think about the thousands of people from other parts of the world who are coming to live in the many communities of our country. As the Holy Spirit powers us up with the truth of his forgiveness and grace he gives us opportunities to witness every day. The grandmother that teaches her grandchildren the stories about Jesus and his love gets them ready to be the Savior's witnesses. The friend who consoles a grieving heart with the truth of God's unending love leaves a heart that is ready to spread that love to another. Your unexpected act of kindness leaves the recipient curious to find out what makes your heart so willing to love and allows you to explain God's grace. These and countless other ways are how God will use our expertise. Once the gospel is truly understood, it springs forth to bear fruit and grow. As our efforts combine with the efforts of Christians around the world, God knits together his perfect plan to make sure more and more hear the message that brings such unexpected help. The gospel of Christ's full and free forgiveness, the gospel we truly understand, is just the thing they need.

And so we should not be surprised that God is using us to do this. There may be those who have personal experience with Vietnam. Some watched the news unfold and others were on the ground as a war was underway. Those people, more than most, know how unexpected it is for an American church body to have an opportunity to spread the gospel in Vietnam. But with God we can expect the unexpected. Our Wisconsin Synod is making plans to build a training center in the capital of Hanoi. Pastor Ham is helping gather and organize training that will reach hundreds of village churches and over 100,000 people with pure grace. We can support their efforts with our prayers and our offerings. We don't know exactly how God will use all these efforts, but God does. We who have truly understood God's grace know that is enough. We ask him to use us to share his Gospel. We ask him to bless his Gospel as he has promised among us, around the world and in Vietnam. We ask him to help people truly understand his grace.

Like the apostle Paul who had never met the Colossians, we may never meet Pastor Ham or the other believers in Vietnam. At least not yet. Because of God's promises we know we will be in heaven and because of the power of gospel we know many who hear this message in Vietnam will be with us there as well. We have the amazing honor of sharing the precious gospel with others. And we know what will happen. God has told us his grace will grow and bear fruit. Amen.