

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

**COLOSSIANS 1, 1-14, LUKE 10:25-37, AMOS 7: 7-17**

**JULY 11, 2004**

**Today we are celebrating Small Church Sunday! We're celebrating all the little churches, throughout the country and the world who struggle to be faithful, who worship with joy, who sing with gusto. And there are more of us than you may imagine--in our denomination over three-fourths of churches have less than 100 in worship every Sunday. Today as we celebrate, I'd like you to imagine that our church receives a letter--it's from a prominent and well-loved religious figure--maybe it's from Billy Graham. Or maybe it's Rick Ufferd-Chase, the present moderator of our General Assembly. We open it, expecting a form letter, maybe asking us for money for a pet project, and we're surprised to find that it's a letter written just to us. We find out that when Jan met Rick at General Assembly she told him about us. We'd feel pretty good, pretty important, receiving such a letter, wouldn't we? We'd be eager to hear what such a person would say to us. That must have been the way the people in the little church at Colossae felt when they received the letter we read today. But the exciting thing is that--it's true--we have received a letter, this letter to the Colossians is just as surely written to us.**

**Notice how the letter is addressed: "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae." To us it would read "to the brothers and sisters in Christ in Redlands." We're located in both our spiritual and our geographical environment. Right away we see the challenge we face. How do we live out our life "in Christ" in the particular situations in which we find ourselves? If we have been reshaped by Christ, how does that affect our life in Redlands? As one theologian put it, how can we as Christians be in but**

**not of the world? How can we as a church be faithful to Christ in this place?**

**After the salutation comes a prayer. And the prayer for the Collosians is a prayer for us. The leader reports that he's thankful for us. For us! Now he doesn't say that he's thankful for our numbers. He doesn't say he's thankful for the money we give. He's thankful for our love and our faith and our hope--thankful that the "word of truth has been bearing fruit among us." Wow! We didn't know we were doing so well. We need to be reminded, maybe, that the Word is bearing fruit, that it's not our own doing.**

**The leader goes on to say what he's asking God to give us. Actually he says he's been praying unceasingly. Wouldn't you like to give him our wish list? Wouldn't you like to say, "Well, if you're going to pray for us, let us tell you what we want." What would you ask for? Would you say: "We want more members." or "We want more money." or "We want more people here on Sunday morning" or "We want more people who are willing to work." Those are not the things this person prays for--no, he prays instead, not for what we might want, but for what we really need. He asks for a lot, but I think it can all be boiled down to three things: that we will be filled the knowledge of God's will, that we'll bear the fruit of good works, and that we'll have fortitude, If we have those, we as a church and we as individuals will have what we really need.**

**So many times, at so many crossroads, we've wanted to know God's will, haven't we? Perhaps some of you are seeking God's will in a particular situation right now. This is, therefore, a very timely prayer. The thing is, we have come good indications already what God's will is. God's will is evidenced in God's commands to us. The prophet Amos gives a vivid**

**example of the way knowledge of God's will should guide us. God says, "I'm using my plumb line. If the wall of your life isn't straight-you're in big trouble." We know what happens when things we build aren't straight, don't we? Our friends in Habitat for Humanity can tell us. If a wall isn't straight it might not even stand. If isn't not straight it can't be joined at the corner to another wall to build a house. If we don't live by God's standards of justice and goodness and mercy our lives will be all messed up.**

**We heard about God's will in the Luke passage didn't we: "Love God with all you heart and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Well, you may say, that's all very well and good, but it doesn't get me far with my particular question. Maybe not, but it does tell you the direction you should be heading: Anything that doesn't fulfill these commands should be eliminated. On the other hand, opportunities to put love of God and neighbor into action should be acted upon. This weekend I heard a woman telling about how two words made all the difference. Her young daughter had died and this death led as well to the death of her marriage. She was unhappy and depressed. Life had lost all meaning. Then one Sunday after church the pastor's wife came running after her as she left the sanctuary. When she reached the woman she said, "I don't know what I can do to help, but I want you to know I care, and I want to help you if I can. And the pastor's wife did help. But the important thing was those two words: "I care." Two little words. How can we care? How can we show that we care?**

**The second petition makes explicit that what God's will for is: If we have this knowledge, we'll bear fruit in every good work. Faith is not just about believing--faith is about action! Love of God and of neighbor leads to action--to good works- But we need to remember Jesus words about who our**

neighbor is, if we are really to know a good work when we see it. You know, we're so used to hearing the words "Good Samaritan together that we forget it was really an oxymoron." It would be like saying "Icy-cold." Jews despised Samaritans every bit as much as they despise Palestinians today, more than some people today despise blacks. That was behind the true impact of the story. To be in Christ here in Redlands means reaching out to the despised ones, the rejected ones in our community. I personally believe that the cross that shines in our hearts that is more important than one on our seal. I believe we should use our resources to help the wounded and hungry in our midst rather than fighting a battle about symbols.

The final petition is that we should have fortitude, or strength. That we should "be prepared to endure everything with patience" We're in this for the long haul, folks! We need strength and persistence. This means, at least, that when we see a need, like the need for a tutoring program, we keep going, even when we have problems or unruly children. But the good news here is that this isn't strength that we have to develop. We don't have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. No, the prayer is "that we will be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power." Our strength comes from God. I'm reminded of the passage: They that wait on the lord will renew their strength, they will rise up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. There's a beautiful song about this as well. God will lift you up on eagles wings...

What a prayer, What a way to live: filled with the knowledge of God's will, bearing fruit of good works, with fortitude proved by God's great power. What will this mean for us as a church? Let me tell you about two other churches. Both of them were small. Both had an average attendance of about 26 in worship every Sunday. The one on the East coast looked at it's

neighborhood, asked itself. What does it mean to be in Christ in this place, and decided the community really needed transitional housing for homeless people. With assistance from the Presbyterian Women's Thank offering they began such a housing program. People learned of this and became interested in the program and the church that sponsored it. Now there are about 75 people attending that church. In our own Presbytery a church asked what does it mean for us to be in Christ in Colton? They realized that many Indonesians lived in their neighborhood. They invited an Indonesian congregation to use their building. They began to do things together. Eventually, they became one church. Now they have about 100 members. But of course the numbers are not what's important: the faith that is willing to risk, the love that wants to reach out and help. The desire to discover and do God's will--to be in Christ in Redlands is important. God grant that the prayer offered for the Colossians become a prayer that is fulfilled in us. Amen