

RESCUED FROM DARKNESS, TRANSFERRED TO LIGHT

COLOSSIANS 1:11-20

NOVEMBER 21, 2004 – NEW MEMBER/STEWARDSHIP DEDICATION

THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A member of the congregation is a Craig Wilson fan and has made me one too. He authors *USA Today's* column entitled, "The Final Word." Wilson hails from western New York and lives today in Washington, D.C. with his partner Jack and their dog Murphy.

In a Thanksgiving article of a few years ago Wilson talked about how the recent feng shui craze circulating the nation would affect his Thanksgiving dinner plans.

Feng shui, if you are not familiar with it, is the ancient Eastern practice of marshalling energy. The belief says that how the objects in your life are arranged can invite or prohibit ch'i – the energy at the core of creation.

Suddenly, people are rearranging everything from pencil cups to grand pianos – opening the way for ch'i to infuse their living and enhance the quality of life.

Recently, at dinner with friends I learned that feng shui says there is an energy center called a 'wealth corner' in every house. I haven't yet found ours. Other feng shui advice has to do with, for example, always placing your shoes left facing right so that the toes point inward rather than right facing left with toes pointing outward.

Wilson says according to his feng shui guide where you sit at the dinner table also makes a difference. "Think carefully about your seating plan this Thanksgiving," the book cautions, "as the direction you face when you eat will have a tremendous impact on how you respond to the food, the atmosphere and those around you." Or maybe, Wilson muses, the author of the book has just been to one too many bad dinner parties.

Today's letter to the Colossians suggests that perhaps St. Paul knew something about feng shui. This Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian year is Christ the King Sunday.

Today we celebrate the kingship of Christ – head of the church, firstborn of creation, so that, as Paul says, he might come to have first place in everything – particularly our daily living.

If feng shui is the ancient art of placing things so that the cosmic life force can positively affect human behavior then says Paul today what matters more than anything is where you place Jesus is in your life.

This morning when Roy Stewart was baptized Doug King asked him the questions of discipleship which are the same questions Doug and I also asked our new members when we welcomed them.

Is Jesus your Lord and Savior? Do you trust him? Do you intend to be his disciple? Will you be a faithful member of the church? These are the identical questions, by the way, we ask parents baptizing an infant, young people at confirmation and elders, deacons and ministers of the word at ordination.

You might say Christians have been practicing feng shui, at least as far as Jesus is concerned, for a long time now.

What we say to adults and parents at baptism, young people at confirmation, and new members uniting with the church is that if Jesus is in the right place it will make all the difference to your life.

If you acknowledge him as head of the church and put him at the center of your life you stand a better chance of moving toward your destiny, utilizing your talents and having a transformational impact on those around you.

If Jesus doesn't occupy the center of your life something else will. If Jesus isn't at the head of the church – if he isn't the primary reason we are all here then some other reason will occupy that place of motivation and focus. Of course there are lots of other reasons we are here and other factors we take into account in our personal decision making but Colossians is clear – when Jesus is at the center of our life and head of the church we stand a better chance of having what Paul calls abundant life.

As pastor of this congregation one of the most satisfying things I do is talk with people about where Jesus fits or doesn't fit into their life.

Just this past week I met with a church member who shared with me his struggle to find a place for Jesus. "I'm at a point in my life," he said, "when I don't want to ignore the question of Jesus anymore. I have trouble with it. Sure, I can ignore this question but I don't want to. I need resolution. I don't want to look back and have someone ask, 'did you do everything you could to answer the big spiritual questions in life?' and have to say 'no.'"

"I believe in God," he said, "but seeing Jesus as Christ the King or with the other lofty titles we assign to him just doesn't translate for me."

Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard faced the same question in Holland in the 1840s. So he told a parable that that went something like this: one day a wise and wealthy king

stepped out on the castle porch overlooking his vast estate, saw a maiden in the valley below and instantly fell in love with her.

“If I go to her with my entourage as king and propose to her she will have to marry me,” he reasoned, “because she will not be able to refuse her king. And if I bring her to my castle and propose marriage she may be so overwhelmed by the opulence of the royal court that she won’t be choosing me so much as the castle.”

So the king decided he would win the love of the maiden by going into the village as a peasant and befriending her on her own terms. But when the villagers discovered that a common stranger had proposed marriage to one of the village daughters and violated the customs of family-arranged courtship they were incensed and stoned him to death. Only did they find when the king’s servants come searching for him to take their master and his bride back to the castle that they had killed the king.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the king, the one with all power and authority who comes among us as one of us and befriends us.

Like the king in Kierkegaard’s parable Jesus rejects the royal power and authority that are rightly his to show us in his living a way so compelling that it can break through even the hardest heart and most fortified life.

That says Paul in Colossians today is the essence of God. Jesus is the image of the invisible God he says. It is what others mean when they say if you want to know who God is look at Jesus.

Love between humans is what God is. Love between humans and God is what God is. Love willing to lay itself down for the beloved – even for the stranger or enemy – is what God is.

There are lots of other things that could be our top priority in life. Maximizing wealth, accumulating power, living through our children the dreams we never realized. I could tell you a few things about my own experience with each of those.

There are lots of things we could pursue as the number one mission of this church – other than loving the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

But there is only one thing that will rescue you and me from the darkness of fear and self-centered living and bring us into a world of light and hope and justice – and that is putting Jesus at the very center of our living and at the head of our church.

In a few minutes we'll be upstairs making Advent wreaths, welcoming our new members, and celebrating the deep giving of this congregation to the ministry of Jesus in this community.

Monday begins a new week. For some of us that will mean excitement and joy and for others hardship and struggle.

Thursday we will gather in our homes with friends and loved ones to give thanks for the bonds of affection we share. And yet, this Thanksgiving I suspect all of us will be ever aware that we live in a world where war continues and disease still ravages.

I can't think of a better way to approach not only the week ahead but the rest of our lives than with the old Celtic prayer upon our lips.

A prayer that even the feng shui masters, if they knew Jesus, might approve:

Christ around us, Christ behind us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us, Christ before us, Christ within us. Christ between us. Amen.