

Count Blessings | Luke 10:25-37; Colossians 1:1-14 | LUMC | July 10, 2022 By Rev Grace Kanake

Dear Church family and friends: it is good to be back after a few weeks of rest, learning, spiritual revival and reflections on work. I am grateful to God for keeping you and me safe and enabling us to meet yet again! What a fellowship we behold! Praise be to God.

Last week Rev. Cheryl preached on the sending out of the 70 preachers to proclaim “peace” in every house they entered to preach the Good News. Jesus sent them with instructions and the message of salvation for everyone who believed. Are we not the beneficiaries of that first mission work? Since that first mission, the Church preach peace; and continues to grow.

Today we explore Colossians, the church in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Colossian Church was planted by Pastor Epaphras, a disciple of St Paul, who had a goal of promoting Christian relationships, overcoming cultic religions, correcting false Christian beliefs and teachings (Gnosticism¹), and emphasizing the Christian life.

Today’s readings in Colossians inform us that the church membership was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. This church was thriving despite confrontation with mystic religions and false Christian teachings and beliefs. Colossae was a small city about 100 miles east of Ephesus.

What lesson can we learn from this church’s mission and vision? The church was inclusive and cared about everyone. The church avoided false teachings, but singled out right doctrine and wisdoms, being Christ-like in their belief and practices. To believe is one thing and to practice what one believes is another.

During our vacation I had time to reflect on what blessings we have and what vision we should have, acknowledging that we also have encouraging and discouraging issues like the church in Colossae. When encountering temptations, what offers me hope is reflecting on God’s deeds in my life and the life of other Christian in the fellowship. The most practical way to encounter God is to remember that God is still working in your life, and God has not withdrawn or gone on a journey leaving you alone.

Here are my reflections for the last two years as your pastor. These are blessings I am so grateful for, and I thank God always for blessing us in this mighty way. Among the blessings is the holding on to our faith during the pandemic. You know only too well the hard times we went through during the pandemic. Covid was and is real and frightening in so many ways, yet we survived—and are surviving it—for the most part. A few of us were sick but we did not lose many/anyone? It was because of our trust in God and obeying our Methodist doctrine: “Work like you will never die and love God like you will die tomorrow”. We combined faith and work ethics, and we agreed to exercise the utmost care, by following Conference and CDC guidelines. We wore masks, we kept

¹ Gnostics initiated members into the cult of just being happy and gaining superior knowledge as opposed to that of the Apostles; they believed Christ was human with divine influence that rested on him during baptism. This divine part left Jesus just before he died on the cross. Thus it is the human Jesus who died, but the divine Jesus did not.

our distance, we withdrew from any activity that would bring us in close proximity such as using hymn books, singing, and shaking hands after worship. For over a year we never had in-person worship, but instead we used an online platform. When we felt Covid had subsided enough, we reopened our doors. Some of us still had reservations, so we agreed on mixed worship (online and in-person) to accommodate everyone. We opened the church doors and God cared for everyone every step of the way. Thanks be to God!

Another blessing came through the ceaseless benefit of prayers. Some of us experienced incurable illness scares. We encouraged ill members to continue with medication while we prayed and pleaded with God to bring needed healing. We indeed received several miraculous healings. Friends, God did not disappoint us. Instead, God surprised us with these healings. Despite our physical frailties, God is ever-caring.

Another blessing came in your financial support. You will recall that during 2020, our contributions had declined too low to meet our expenses. I consider the reversal in giving a great blessing: we revived our giving, and we may soon have our ducks in a row. Methodists provide financial support as an expression of faith and fulfillment of the vows we made at our baptism. Financial giving is a work of love for and commitment to our healing and saving God. Giving is a spiritual practice never to be taken lightly. We experience God during the offering of our gifts and souls.

This church this year stands at 138 years (1884-2022) of ministry in this city. During our history, we have experienced ups and downs in pastoral and laity leadership, including low membership growth. Yet God never left us alone even in those hard times. God will never leave us alone!

God has a plan for our future. Yes, I reflected on the future of our congregation. I note that we are currently experiencing slow growth and that should be a concern to us. I am praying hard against closing the church doors. I have no closer liturgy than this church's. It worries me because the LUMC has been the center of the spirituality for the city for 138 years. Through the years we mentored many members in other denominations within the city and beyond. We have promoted education, social life, the economy and ethical politics of this area in ways unimaginable! What would happen if we no longer existed? Where will be the center of spiritual strength for everything Lynden?

You know so well that we have openly discussed, and continue to discuss, our future: should we merge with another church; should we be reviewing our personal doctrines and teachings; should we be open to the policies of the "new age"; should we simply convert our building into a Christian mental health hospital or a Christian social center? We must make bold decisions to enhance growth. A devoted and renowned member knew we need to grow; she bequeathed us with a donation we can channel toward that growth. We can support the ongoing discussions of the COM (council on ministries), and prayerfully continue to work in this area and not allow this church to close its doors.

I have mentioned a few of the communal blessings we received. I will go a step further and remember individuals who, during 2020 to 2022 have received double blessings. However, this is not the time to expound on individual blessings, including mine. I know we are all forever grateful to God for these public and private blessings received.

These blessings were achieved because of our ceaseless efforts, deep prayers, and bold decisions. I have prayed and fasted many times beseeching God to spare us death, physical pain, deranged spirit, and emotional hurt. Early every morning between 5 and 6, I am praying and crying to God. And believe me, mountains have been moved to where God wants them to be. Chaos has changed to laughter and fear has changed to courage. I have seen the hand of the Lord rescuing us from ourselves. Does this mean we are out of danger?

No.

The Colossian church had to contend with wrong doctrines, lack of sincere faith and practice, and a holier-than-thou attitude. They dealt with false prophets every day. We still have these evils affecting churches today. We have churches promoting different tenets. We have cultic preachers promoting their cults, and we have some Christians always aspiring to divide the body of Christ. Even Methodists complain about their own rules (the Book of Discipline) and want to avoid them. A unique Methodist blessing is the Book of Discipline that enables us to avoid disagreements and misunderstandings. Without these disciplines we would not have lasted nearly 300 years of ministry! Without these rules, we would behave like cult movements and divide and fight over leadership and the property. We are so aware of cults that divide and close doors.

St Paul advises us to pray without ceasing. Paul never ceased to pray for the church in Colossae from the moment he understood their spiritual needs. Praying is sending a petition to God whenever we have an issue. Paul reminds us that prayer moves mountains. Prayer asks God to bless us. Prayer awakens our emotional, physical and spiritual apathy. Prayer brings God into our sphere of being. Prayer convinces God to fill us with the knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and understanding of every issue thrown to us from any direction.

When we fully acknowledge God and fully live on God's terms, he will make us strong in every way and he will give us strength (tenacity) to patiently endure every temptation. I know God shall declare us the winners. God loves us as we are. In the story of the Good Samaritan, we experience God, we feel and see God's mercy and feel God's presence through the kind deeds of the Samaritan.

Let us not forget that Samaritans were considered to be outside the Jewish covenant, yet God honored this Samaritan's deeds over the Jew who passed by the roadside away from the battered man; he left him to die to avoid spiritual contamination. God is God of the despised and is God of the lowly. God honors a person of contrite and remorseful heart, not the churchgoer whose life has not been touched and changed by the Good News.

We must allow God and not ourselves to take the credit when we do God's work. We must be willing to go an extra mile to praise God from whom all blessings flow. We are God's children inheriting eternity with Jesus. We are counted righteous not by our deeds but by God's grace. Those who love God and live and practice their faith, are no longer bound by the evil one because they live in the glorious light of Jesus. Amen.