

Today we are going to turn to the beginning of another one of Paul's letters. This is a letter which the first verse tells us was written by both Paul and his companion Timothy. We will be reading this letter written to the church in the town of Colossae, which we call Colossians. The church that Paul is writing to was founded by Paul's associate named Epaphras whom we will hear mentioned in our reading today.

The part we will hear is the thanksgiving portion of Paul's letter. Paul usually begins his letters by first introducing himself and then thanking the church that he writes to in some way. He doesn't always thank them as we discovered when we read through Paul's letter to the Galatians a few weeks ago. Paul also writes this letter from prison.

Paul is writing this letter to encourage the Colossians to keep Jesus central in their lives. They were starting to make other things central in their life and Paul is seeking to call them back to placing Jesus as their central Messiah.

I am going to be reading the first 23 verses and I will be reading from The Message translation. I am going to invite you to not try to follow along in a pew Bible because you will find the words quite different. If you have a tablet and you want to find this portion of the Scripture in the Message translation that would be fine.

I want us to imagine that Paul and Timothy are writing this letter to us. I find these 23 verses to be so powerful and I hope you do as well. They are a complete sermon in themselves. Let us now listen.

Read Colossians 1: 1-23

Kerry Patterson tells the story about the time when he was 14 years old and he burned down his bedroom. As he begins telling his story of this incident, he says that when he woke up that bright and sunny morning, he never suspected that he'd burn down his bedroom. But some days just don't go as planned.

On this particular day he was bored. He then remembered that under his desk was a large bowl of rocket fuel that he had recently concocted and set aside. He decided that this day would be the perfect time to turn it from a dry powder into a solid mass by melting it down and then letting it solidify.

On a personal note, I was never this type of kid who experimented with chemical reactions. I am not this type of adult as you all can attest to that know me. I am going to continue telling this story about chemical reactions that some of you know exactly what is happening. I am just telling the story because I don't have a clue. But I will do my best to tell this story about a science experiment that went terribly wrong for this 14 year old boy.

Kerry Patterson says that he had never performed this operation before, nor did he have the necessary equipment on hand, but he had heard that transforming the powdered fuel into a solid block gave it more stability. He quickly fashioned a Bunsen burner out of materials he found in the bathroom.

A Vaseline lid, a wad of cotton, and a couple of jiggers of his dad's aftershave lotion—and voila! He was ready to cook. Sounds like a meth lab to me but, like I said, I am clueless here about what is happening.

Next, Kerry poured a generous portion of the fuel into a Pioneer chemical container that consisted of a cardboard tube with a flat metal bottom and a pop-out metal top. The cardboard would provide him with a safe place to grip the container, while the metal bottom would take the flame and melt the fuel.

Within minutes, he gingerly held the beaker above the Aqua Velva flame and was merrily melting the powder. Then, with no warning whatsoever, the powder hit its ignition point and burst into a frightening torrent of smoke and flames, scorching the wallpaper above his desk and burning a hole in the ten-foot ceiling.

He couldn't drop the blazing tube or it would have careened around the room and set the drapes and other flammables on fire. So he gritted his teeth and held the flame-spitting cylinder firmly through its entire burn.

For a full minute, the fiery tube charred the wall and ceiling while dropping blazing bits of debris on his arms and legs—burning holes in his shirt and pants and leaving behind pea-sized scars.

The rest, he says, is a blur. When it was finally safe to set the container down he bolted from his bedroom and threw open the front door to vent the house. A fire truck loaded with highly animated fire fighters rolled into their driveway and it wasn't long until several of them were screaming at him for being so stupid as to—well, cook rocket fuel in his bedroom.

And then Kerry's folks came home. As the fire crew backed out of their driveway his Mom and Dad slowly approached. As he recalls, watching a fire crew pull away from your home is never a good sign when you're driving into the driveway of a home with a teenage boy.

As his two parents walked stoically into Kerry's bedroom and surveyed the damage, his Mom stated, "You realize, of course, that you're going to have to set this right." Which he did, having to pay for the damages out of his college savings.

And then his Mom asked him this, "What did you learn from this adventure?" Kerry says most parents, when faced with the smoldering shell of a bedroom would have grounded their careless son through social security. Or maybe they would have hurled threats, pulled out their hair, or perhaps guilt-tripped their soon-to-be-jailed juvenile delinquent into years of therapy.

But his mom simply wanted to know what he had learned from the incident. For her, every calamity was a learning opportunity, every mishap a chance to glean one more morsel of truth from the infinitely instructive universe.

I think Paul and Timothy would affirm these parents for the way they handled their inquisitive son. They affirm the Colossians for the way they are bearing fruit. They tell them that they have been keeping the Colossians in their prayers. They have been praying for the Colossians to be filled with knowledge of God's will. They invite the Colossians into strength through the power of God and God's forgiveness.

Maybe what I am about to say relates to this Scripture and maybe it does not. But I am going to say it anyway. Forgive me if what I say is off topic. What I read from Paul is probably a complete sermon in itself. But since Paul and Timothy pray for the Colossians to be filled with knowledge I am going to allow that phrase to give me some leeway this morning.

For the past few days our nation has been in a national dialogue after the death of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman. Unfortunately most of the conversation has been with people who affirm our own reaction to the verdict. We turn to MSNBC or Fox News, which ever network we normally turn on, to give us ammunition against others who think differently.

But it seems to me that when events like this happen and we only listen to the ones who think like us we are not growing in knowledge. We are missing an opportunity to learn something which can grow us closer to God.

What I hope that we Christians at Allison Creek can do is to reach across some chasms that exist in our culture and try to initiate conversations with people who have reached a different conclusion and try to listen to why they think the way they do.

Not judge. But listen. To not be quick to defend our position but to listen to the other. It doesn't mean we change our mind. But it does mean that we listen to understand why someone can come to a completely different conclusion. To listen to their experiences of life.

Our nation needs some good listeners. We need less talkers and we really need less yellers. I hope that we at Allison Creek can be the listeners.

If we model good listening in our community I do believe we will bear the kind of good fruit that Paul affirms in his letter to the Colossians.

I do believe that listening shows knowledge. And I believe that by listening we can be some great evangelists.

Because a lot of people in our culture have come to the conclusion that Christians don't listen very well. A lot of people think that Christians only know how to yell at other people and try to force others to believe and think like we do.

I have been in a conversation with a young adult who grew up in this church, he sat in these pews, was active in the youth group. This young man is now not sure he can call himself a Christian anymore because he is tired of the ways that Christians are yelling at others.

Let's show others that Christians can be good listeners. AMEN.

-Patterson, Kerry, "Is It Rocket Science?" from the Vital Smarts e-newsletter dated 7/17/13

-Given: July 21, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)