

Proper 13C: Colossians 3:1-11
Church of the Good Shepherd
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August 3, 2025

Things That Are Above

An article in a San Francisco newspaper a while ago reported the story of a young man who once found a \$5 bill on the street. Upon his lucky find, he resolved that, from that point on, he would never lift his eyes while walking. The paper went on to say that over the years he accumulated, among other things, 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back and a miserly disposition. One might argue that he lost something as well. With his eyes ever trained downward, never looking up, he missed the glory of the sunset, the joy of birds in flight, the smiles of friends, and the freshness of blue skies. And I have to imagine, he bumped into a fair share of people too, along the way. With his eyes so focused on the ground, he missed the world.

What this guy did literally, always looking down, we do spiritually. I mean, most of us don't walk around staring at the sidewalk all day, but we can become so engrossed with the things of this life, life on the ground, that we miss what's up ahead of us. We become so preoccupied with the practicalities of everyday life—the demands of our careers, our families, the expectations of others—they are all we think about, all we pay attention to. Maybe we don't say that this earthly life is all that matters, but we act as if it is.

Something like that seems to have been going on in the church at Colossae, what prompted Paul to write to the Christians there. We looked at this Letter to the Colossians a few weeks ago, and considered Paul's bold claim that Jesus' death and resurrection was *the* pivotal event in history, the watershed event for the world, and in a special way for the lives of believers. In our baptism, he says, we are united to Jesus in his death and resurrection, we effectively die and are raised anew. And now in this morning's lesson, Paul lays out some of the implications of that fact, the "therefore" that comes from the momentous event. "Since you have been raised with Christ," he says, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

Look up, he says, stop looking down. This is more than mere optimism, more than telling them to keep their chin up, tomorrow will be better. What Paul is talking about here is directing our gaze, our focus, our attention heavenward, to "aim upward," to set our sights towards God and God's dealings, and not be so engrossed, so preoccupied with worldly things, the matters of daily life.

Now, hearing that, you may figure this is just some pious admonition: we should be always thinking about God, "thinking heavenly thoughts" ...yeah, yeah. And maybe you're remembering Oliver Wendell Holmes's dismissal of people who are "so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." To be sure, there are people whose "spirituality" is so excessive, so all-consuming, that they seem to have a hard time relating to real life. Religion becomes a way for them to escape from reality.

But that is not what Paul is talking about. He's not talking about escaping from or denigrating the everyday, but rather seeking something *beyond* the everyday, seeking something *in* the everyday, that nevertheless *transcends* it, that *stands above* the everyday. Far from taking us out of this world, this "something beyond" gives meaning and purpose, motivation and direction to this life.

As a matter of fact, it's precisely those who are the most "heavenly-minded" that are able to do the most earthly good. Think of William Wilberforce, the evangelical champion for the abolition of slavery in 19th century England, and Martin Luther King Jr., a prophet who led the civil rights movement with a vision of the multi-racial kingdom of God. Or take William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, or Louie Giglio, the pastor and founder of the Passion movement for Christian young adults, who at one of his events raised \$3 million to fight for the 27 million human slaves currently held in brutal captivity.

As CS Lewis observed, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in.' Aim at earth and you will get neither."

And the consequence of focusing on this world isn't *just* that the Christian church has become "obsolete," to use Christian Smith's word from a few weeks ago. It's also made transcendence itself irrelevant, if not wholly unbelievable. For, even if there is something beyond this world, the general assumption is it doesn't matter, it has no effect on our lives. We can get on pretty well, we reckon, with our collective attention fixed at ground level, focused on everyday life. Where we are encouraged to pursue this-worldly goals like self-realization, affirmation, and the fulfillment of human desire, what some philosophers loftily call "human flourishing." There is no greater purpose under the sun, we are told, no larger vision, no deeper story, than this, than pursuing our individual happiness, living our best life now.

Now, it is not simply the case then that there are some people who believe in something beyond and others who don't, "to each his own." Whether there is in fact something beyond this life or not is in fact a matter of much contention, and not just from the religious camp. For, to those who are committed to life at ground-level, openness to what is above, beyond, transcendent, is not just woefully misguided, but a threat. Because if you believe that we should be about happiness, affirmation, and rights in a functional social order, religion's insistence that there is something beyond all this, a greater good than human desires, a deeper, more authoritative command than to just make the world a better place—well, that undercuts the whole argument for the modern moral order.

Indeed, whether we call this "something more" virtue, or sacred wisdom, the Transcendent, or God, the fact that it is not to be found or founded upon anything of this earth, but comes from beyond the everyday, means that it is a higher order and therefore of a greater importance than whatever good we might have in this earthly life. It's not that this 'beyond' view sees earthly happiness as a bad thing, but it nevertheless insists that there is something more, something greater, than our desires, something to which our drives and passions must rightly be subordinated.

Now, for those who value nothing higher than the pursuit of happiness, this is a real problem. For them, respect for the beyond represents an attack on the adequacy of our everyday lives and a challenge to the primacy of our drives and passions. It calls into question the virtue of the pursuing our desires, our freedom to define our own ends. And so it must be resisted.

I know I'm talking in abstractions and generalities here. But you can understand how, if you're used to playing by one set of rules (life is about finding happiness on earth, say) but then someone insists that you've been playing the game all wrong, that the real goal is actually something entirely different, that the real action is going on a whole other level ... you're probably not going to welcome the news. Likely you'll insist that, no, *you* 've been right all along. But, even if there may be another way to play, your way is better.

And that really is the question: whether life lived at ground level really is better, whether a life divorced from the transcendent is the best way to live, whether it brings out the best in us. The fact is, despite the noble appeals to "human flourishing," life at ground level rarely lives up to its hype. This is because the freedom to pursue our desires means the freedom to pursue *all* our desires, even the dark and indecent ones. "Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, greed"—these are all behaviors, Paul says, that come from living at ground level. And more than just degrading ourselves, the freedom of desire also inevitably leads to conflict with others and their desires. Hence Paul's mention of "anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene speech, and lying," as further consequences of setting our sights on the below. You see, if there's nothing beyond this life, nothing more to hope for, of course we'll look out for ourselves and make sure we "get ours," even if we have to lie, cheat, and hurt others in the process.

To be sure, those who set their eyes above, who aim upward, are not unfamiliar with these behaviors. They are sinners too. And yet those who seek the beyond are also capable of the most amazing acts of selflessness and generosity and self-restraint—giving up well-paid positions to teach in the inner-city or to become missionaries in far-off countries; donating their time and money to help others in need; devoting themselves to projects which won't be completed in their lifetime and for which they get no recognition; forgiving those who hurt them instead of retaliating; restricting their sexual drives to marriage rather than indulging in a series of commitment-free relationships; being honest about their failures, instead of lying to cover them up or to advance themselves. These behaviors make no sense to those focused on life on the ground, because they do nothing to contribute to human flourishing. Indeed, they seem guaranteed to *work against* their happiness. That some people do them anyway just shows that they've got their sights set on something beyond this life, something greater than mere earthly happiness.

The story of Hugo Gryn illustrates this point vividly. When Hugo was a boy, he and his family were prisoners at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Yet even in the middle of that extreme hardship, his father was determined to observe the special Sabbaths and Jewish festivals. On one particular evening, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter so they could have a Sabbath candle. Hugo objected: "Father, that is all the butter we have!" But his father calmly replied: "Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope." From an earth-bound perspective, Hugo's father's action makes no sense. But for the one who has his eyes set on things above, reserving the butter for the Sabbath makes perfect sense.

Paul's admonition to "set our sights on things above" may sound like just some overly-pious, religious platitude. But, in fact it expresses a fundamental calling and truth about human nature, that openness to the beyond is essential to human existence, that we are made to "seek things that are above" and not just make do with what we can here at ground level. We can't live without transcendence, not really, not well. Closed off from the beyond, our lives remain cramped, confused, and conflict-laden. And without something beyond, a transcendent aim, without a shared appreciation of a good beyond individual desires, without an acknowledgement of God to guide us and order our desires, human society will inevitably fall apart. Openness to the beyond expands our vision, gives us something to set our sights on, that we might know which way we should go, know where God is taking us. Thanks be to God for giving us this vision and for calling our attention to it. May it inspire us in this life and the life to come. Amen.