

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
January 23, 2011**

“Love Takes Time” – Week 3

Colossians 4:2-6

Take Time for Your Neighbors!

- 1. By your earnest prayers**
- 2. By your own actions**

Hymns: 241 – 525 – 521

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Colossians 4:2-6 – Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Imagine you have been unjustly imprisoned. False accusations have been made against you. You have had no other choice but to appeal to a higher court in the land, so you await your trial, imprisoned indefinitely. What would be on your mind now? What would you be praying about now? Would earnest prayers be rising from your heart to God’s throne for your situation? Would you plead with God that he would see fit to free you? Would you pray that the legal system would work smoothly and justly? Wouldn’t you be praying hard about your situation?

A year passes. No progress has been made in your upcoming hearing. What are your thoughts? Wouldn’t your prayers rise up to God even more earnestly about your situation?

Two years pass. Won’t your prayers be directly to God even more earnestly about your situation? How about after three years? Four years?

Such was the plight of the Apostle Paul. He was under arrest for four years before significant progress was made in his case, two years in Palestine and then two years under house arrest in Rome. What was on his mind? His thoughts in our reading do not drift to his own condition at the time. They don’t plead with God for his quick release. They are not inwardly directed at all, although we would not fault Paul for such prayers. In our reading today, Paul prays for outreach to people who are not believers in Christ! As he writes to the church in Asia Minor in Colosse, he thinks about their neighbors.

As we continue our sermon series called “Love Takes Time,” which our Wisconsin Synod churches are following, we focus on the fact that our Christian love compels us to **“Take Time for Our Neighbors!”** Using the words of Paul to the Colossians in the New Testament, let us learn this lesson and see:

- 1. This will involve your earnest prayers**
- 2. This will involve your own actions**

1 – Our reading begins: *“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”*

If you would like to read the full context of these words that Paul wrote to the Colossian church, you would need to read Acts 21-28. Paul had come to Jerusalem, a very dangerous place for him to be due to the hostility of the Jewish leaders. He was accused unjustly of bringing a Gentile into the Temple area and an uproar arose, instigated by the Jewish leaders. Paul was arrested by the Roman governor, who held him for two years. Paul then decided to appeal to a trial before Caesar himself, a right he held as a Roman citizen. After a harrowing voyage to Rome, Paul ended up being held under house arrest for two years, awaiting his trial. It was under these circumstances that Paul writes the words of our text in a letter he sent to the church at Colosse in Asia Minor.

As we said before, his words amazingly instruct them to think about their neighbors, their fellow men around them who did not know or

believe in Jesus as their Savior yet. **Paul tells them to “Take Time for Their Neighbor!”**

Paul’s words inform them that this will take their prayers. Paul tells them to “devote themselves to prayer,” literally the word for power and strength: “Be strong in prayer.” Paul tells them to be “watchful” in prayer, much like Jesus’ words to “watch and pray.” Paul tells them to have “thanksgiving” as they pray. Amazing words from an unjustly imprisoned man!

Paul tells them they are to pray for two things as they think about their neighbor. First, they were to pray that God would give Paul an open door. The picture, of course, is that God would open up avenues through which people around Paul could hear the message of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, so that they could believe in him as their own Savior.

Was it really necessary for the Colossians to pray about that? Aren’t these doors always open? Doesn’t God want all people to hear and believe the message of Jesus Christ, who died for the sin of the world?

It was necessary for the Colossians to pray for this for a few reasons:

1. God dictates the opportunities to share the message of Christ. You might recall that on his second missionary trip, Paul wanted to travel north of Asia Minor into an area called Bithynia. In Acts 16 it says that “the spirit of Jesus would not allow them” to go in that direction! God’s will eventually became clear that he wanted them to travel west to Greece with the message of the gospel to cities like Corinth, Thessalonica, and Philippi. God dictates the doors that open!
2. God alone can convert hearts to believe this message. Many of you no doubt remember the memory verse “*No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.*” Man can witness about the message, but only God can open doors in the heart to believe.

3. Paul currently had limited open doors. Under house arrest, his work of spreading the gospel had not been as free as in years past.

Prayers to God that he would open doors for Paul and the gospel were very fitting!

Paul also tells them to pray that God would help him to “proclaim it clearly, as he should.” Paul did have guards that were around him. Paul was allowed visitors while he was under house arrest. Paul was also going to have the chance to speak for himself in the future when his case was called. He undoubtedly felt the pressure of searching for the right words to speak. Perhaps he might even feel a temptation to soften the message of Christ and his mission as he looked ahead to what he would say. **He prayed that God would wing his words.**

Let’s pause here to apply this first lesson that Paul taught the Colossians to our own lives. As you consider the theme “Take Time for Your Neighbors,” Paul instructs you that this begins with prayer. “No objections!” you say. “I stand ready to pray for the advancement of the gospel.”

You do? When was the last time you prayed for your own pastor’s Sunday message that he was preparing? When a pastor sits down a week or more ahead of time to begin study and contemplation for a Sunday message, he does it with much fear and trembling. It is the biggest item on his weekly “to do” list. Have you prayed on a Tuesday or Wednesday that God would bless your pastor as he wrestles with the law and gospel he’s been given for that week? The People’s Bible commentary on these verses make an interesting point that many church members might be ready to criticize and critique something with their pastor rather than be ready first to offer God their prayers for him. Your two pastors welcome your prayers to God’s throne for their sermon messages!

Have you prayed for our Holy Trinity Lutheran School students and teachers lately? Every school day religious instruction is being given via Catechism classes, Bible history, or hymnology. Certainly you have been praying about this! Have you prayed for your called teachers to teach clearly and that God blesses their instruction?

Have you prayed for the Evergreen Lutheran High School faculty that you support? Have you prayed for our home and world missionaries around the globe who carry the gospel? Surely you have! You have no objections to praying for the advancement of the gospel, right?

The People's Bible commentary has an interesting thought along these lines. The writer says, **“Any number of missionaries have told us that they are convinced that it is only through the prayers of the Christians ‘back home’ that they are blessed with the special strength they need to fulfill their often difficult and dangerous calling. Some of the most cherished encouragement I have ever received in my personal ministry came from a kind and concerned ‘matriarch’ of a large family in my congregation who, before the Lord took her to her eternal home, assured me frequently, ‘Pastor, our family is praying for you.’ ”**

Also, have you been praying for our church's outreach to our own community neighbors? Our Christmas campaign? Our school contacts? Our own members' words of gospel that they share?

When we realize we have fallen short in our prayers, God lead us to repent! May we thank God that he has sent that gospel message of Christ crucified for us first, to heal our sin-sick soul. **Then may we resolve to take time. Take time to pray for the advancement of that gospel through our pastors and called workers and through our congregation!**

2 — Paul gives us one other way that we can take time for our neighbor in these verses. He writes, “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” Time spent is not only going to involve the Colossians' prayers. It will also involve their actions.

To set the stage for Paul's words, what exactly were outsiders' thoughts toward Christians in the Roman Empire? Normally, they were not favorable. Oftentimes Christians were called “atheists” by unbelievers. They were called this because they worshiped an unseen God. They were also labeled as “unpatriotic.” After all, they would not burn incense

in worship of the emperor. Christians often did not have a good reputation.

What did Paul encourage them to do, to attempt to win outsiders over for Christ? First, he told them to let their conversation be seasoned with salt. Speak with salt! What did Paul mean? There's a great difference between food that has salt and food that does not have salt. If you enjoy popcorn, I don't imagine many of you like your popcorn without a stich of salt. In fact, it makes it quite unpalatable. I don't imagine many here would like their eggs without any type of seasoning on them, salt or otherwise. Seasoning can make all the difference in dishes. That's why a shaker is available right on the counter or the table in many of your kitchens. Paul says that their speech was to have seasoning. It was to be pleasing, gracious, courteous, kind, and palatable. It happened because they were to be “wise” in the way they spoke and acted toward outsiders. James 3 speaks about such Christian wisdom: *“The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”*

The opposite type of speech would be worldly speech characterized by foulness, impatience, and anger. It would be speech that broke the 2nd Commandment in the use of God's name and the 8th Commandment in the way words would hurt their neighbor.

Their example in “seasoned” speech was to be Christ himself. Christ represented his heavenly Father perfectly. Christ spoke in love. Yes, Christ spoke clearly and honestly when it came to calling sin a sin, but when he was persecuted and put on trial he did not lash out in sin and anger. The Colossians “seasoned,” pleasant speech would be a good reflection of their Savior and their heavenly Father.

The second directive Paul gives is that they are to “make the most of every opportunity.” This is an interesting Greek phrase in the original language. Literally, Paul uses the word for “buy.” He says that they are to “buy up” time. In our idioms we might say “snap up” the time. Some English translations say “redeem the time.”

Do you like to snap up deals? Have you ever been at the store when there's a tremendous

buy on a certain item and you get ten or twenty of them? You fill your cart because the time is right; do it now! Don't wait around, for who knows when the deal will be over? That's how Paul told them to look at their witnessing opportunities toward their neighbor. Make the most of time. Don't delay! They didn't know when they'd have another opportunity to speak about the Savior and they didn't know when the Lord would return to judge the world. Witnessing was an urgent matter!

Does this describe you? Do you think this way when you think about your neighbor and others around you in daily life? Do you have this same concern for your neighbor's salvation?

How do you view your neighbors to begin with? Answers among you all would vary:

- Perhaps your neighbor is the one you just hope to tolerate
- Or the one who makes life inconvenient for my family
- Or your rival!
- Or the one who is disruptive, especially on Friday and Saturday nights
- Or is one to avoid
- Or are "those slobby people"
- Or one you have a "wave relationship" with – They're the one you wave to (albeit courteously) when they're in the driveway at the same time, and that's all the deeper your relationship gets
- Or worse yet, you might not even know who they are

How would Christ view the people in your neighborhood? We know from Scripture how he viewed people. He looked at the crowds once and had pity on them as "sheep without a shepherd," meaning that he knew they were religiously lost and misled. He saw the rich young man who loved his riches and "loved him." He went and talked with a woman at a well who was living in sin with her boyfriend, and as John 4 says, "he had to go through Samaria." He needed to have that encounter. He hung out with "sinners" and outcasts in society because the sick needed a doctor. That's how Jesus views your neighbors.

Do you view them in this way? Or do you need to pray, "Jesus, help me see people as you do"? The proof of our concern for them would be in how we have spiritually looked out for our neighbors in the past. How many neighbors did you bring to church as a visitor in the last year? How many neighbors by your home have you mentioned Christ to? Where does a person start?

When we wonder, we need to go back to Paul's words in Colossians. First, let your conversation be seasoned with salt. **Take time to talk to those around you in the neighborhood where God has put you. Don't let them think for a minute that you are the crabby person down the block, or that you are always too busy or disinterested. Worse yet, would they wonder who you are?**

We also make the most of the opportunities we have, snapping up the time. **Time is wasting! The Lord's return is even nearer. How much time do you have? How long will you wait? Go onto their turf in a conversation. Ask them about their life to start a conversation. And look for opportunities to build a bridge to a conversation about Jesus. Your concern and love for them will lead you to think about their eternal wellbeing!**

As we close our look at taking time for our neighbors, perhaps you'll need a time readjustment in your life. Maybe you'll have to consciously take some time to get to know those around your home. Perhaps you'll need to set some goals to keep you thinking about it and on task. If so, it will be time well spent for the kingdom of God.

May we learn from Paul's words today.
May we take time for our neighbor:

This will involve your earnest prayers. And this will involve your own actions.

God help us to take time for others, so we can tell them what he took time to do for them! Amen.