The city of Colossae had once been an important center of commerce that enjoyed significant influence, but by the first century of our era it had been in decline for some time. Other cites had eclipsed it in importance in that corner of the Roman Empire.

The people of Colossae were a mixed bunch. Some were pagans committed to a cult of heavenly beings represented by the sun, moon, and other cosmic bodies they worshipped as multiple deities. Others were Jews that had been there for centuries. Still others created their own sacred synthesis by borrowing from several different religions.

The letter to the Colossian church addresses an increasingly confusing, contentious, and chaotic environment. The fledgling congregation needs help understanding what it means to be Christian in that
context. It seeks a clear vision of what God is calling it to do and be.

Christians in every age, including our own, have wanted the same thing.

The Irish monastic prayer dating from as early as the 8th century and later set to a popular folk tune speaks to this same longing:

“Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.”

The young Colossian church found itself surrounded by a variety of contending claims to ultimate allegiance. Not unlike today, there were competing descriptions of reality. Early in the letter it warns against those who “may deceive you with plausible arguments.”

Colossian Christians, the letter says, should be on guard:

“Watch out that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human
tradition, according to the elemental principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:4, 8)

This ancient letter to Christians in a local church in disputatious times aims to reinvigorate their faith. The author wants to clarify the core claims of those who follow Jesus Christ. To do so, the letter employs a common metaphor used by Christians of the time, to describe the transforming power of faith: believers are “clothed with a new self.”

“You have stripped off the old self with its practices,” the letter reminds them,

“And have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!” (Colossians 3:9-11)

Living into a new self is the hallmark of a follower of Jesus. Christ is all and in all. Everything changes. We take off the old ways and step into the new.
Every Sunday we re-enact that transformation when we say in response to God’s forgiveness – as we did a few minutes ago: Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun.

To follow Jesus means being changed from how we used to live, to a new way of living. That is more easily said than done – no surprise to us – which is why in the Reformed tradition whenever we gather to worship, we own up to falling short of God’s hopes for us. We need God’s mercy because we are not perfect and do not have all the answers and do not always live in a way that reflects God’s desires for us.

“Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
Thou my soul’s shelter, and thou my high tower;
Raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.”

There’s a lot that claims to pass as Christian faith in America these days, and many distinct versions of it. I’m not referring here simply to the differences among Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans and Presbyterians, or Catholics. I’m thinking more along the lines of what the church in Colossae was facing – a kind of perversion of the faith to which Jesus called them and now calls us.
If our Christianity ceases to focus on Jesus and his command to love God and to love neighbor and instead centers on the acquisition of power or the marginalization of some of God’s children or the support of unjust systems or the embrace of violence to settle differences, then we have lost our way.

Christianity insists on keeping God’s hope for human community at the center, not ours. Christ is all and in all. When we replace the grace and mercy of God as we know it in Jesus Christ with something of our own creation, we become idolatrous, and it is time to own the error of our ways and leave that old self behind.

“Set us free from a past that we cannot change,” we prayed earlier in our worship this morning. “Open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world.”

Christianity requires humility, and humility is in short supply these days. We’re witnessing a good illustration of the power of humility and willingness to confess a sinful past in the visit of Pope Francis to the First Nations of
Canada. Set us free from a past that we cannot change and open to us a future in which we can be changed. The goal is to die to the old self and put on the new self, and that new self bears “the image of its creator.”

“Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise; Thou mine inheritance, now and always; Thou and thou only, first in my heart, High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.”

The young Colossian church was struggling with those who would corrupt the faith for their own purposes and thereby miss the point of Christian love altogether. In our time we are confronted with similar challenges in the way some are wielding faith as a tool for accruing power or a means to divide and exclude and intimidate. That version of Christianity bears little resemblance to the life and teachings of Jesus.

Some call this “imposter Christianity.” It purports to share the commitments of Jesus but instead distorts them and uses them in idolatrous ways to secure power. Imposter Christianity in America conflates one religion’s claims with the country’s politics and culture, ignoring history and the religiously mixed and secular nature of our
national life. (Practices of relation: Gorski and Perry – The Immanent Frame (ssrc.org))

I don’t often speak about the way others express what they say is their Christianity, but these times – as in ancient Colossae – call for clarity. Christian nationalism is on the rise in this land. Surveys show that 20% of Americans embrace Christian nationalism. (The Growing Threat of Christian Nationalism in the U.S. | Time) It threatens our multi-racial and religiously plural democracy – and makes a mockery of the gospel.

"Christian nationalism," Dr. Paul Miller writes, "Is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way."

Dr. Miller, a professor at Georgetown University, was interviewed last year for an article in the evangelical journal Christianity Today.

“Christian nationalists,” he says,

“Assert that America is and must remain a 'Christian nation'—not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for what America
must continue to be in the future. (They) believe that Christianity should enjoy a privileged position in the public square.” (https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html)

It is incumbent upon those of us who seek to follow the Jesus we encounter in Holy Scripture, in the gospels, to defend a Christianity that is less fearful and less self-absorbed, and more willing to live sacrificially for others, especially those trampled upon by injustice and hatred because of who they are or the color of their skin or their differing abilities or where they’re from or what language they speak or whom they love.

“These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life,” the author says to the Colossian Christians, who once lived in ways that did not reflect the love and justice of God.

“Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly,” the letter continues,

“Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)...You must get rid of all such things: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its
practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self.” (Colossians 3:7, 5, 8)

If Christ is in us, the writer of Colossians argues, then we ought to live in ways that reflect the light and love of Christ. This is the challenge of our faith, and it is intensely personal: to adopt and then live a Christ-like life that puts on a new self and leaves the old self behind. The new self centers on love of God and others – and not only ourselves or “our people.”

“Let those who are wise,” the psalmist says, “Pay attention to these things and consider the steadfast love of the LORD.” (Psalm 107:43)

Living into a new self has profound implications for our life together, because we do not exist apart from one another. Christ is all and in all. Renewed individuals help produce renewed communities.

Those of us who are part of worshipping Christian congregations today, like this one, are the Colossians of this time. In the midst of our chaos and confusion, with competing claims clamoring for our attention, we need to be clear about what it means to follow Jesus: to love God and to love neighbor, to serve God and to serve neighbor.
“High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.”

May it be so.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.