



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Inside the Hard Crust”

Colossians 1:11-20

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¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Many years ago, I received this geode from a geologist—or, rather, from his widow. I wasn't special. She had many of these geodes to give away and the most impressive ones went to other geologists, close friends, and family members. She had so many to give away because her husband had an eye for spotting rocks that he suspected had hidden within them an array of crystals. Most would see just a rock, but he could see past the hard crust to what lay within—something hidden, something beautiful.

Sometimes hard life experiences are like that. Sometimes—



not always, but sometimes,
and even many times if one is gifted the right perspective—
there is something beautiful in the middle of what is hard.

A River Runs Through It is one of my favorite books. Short book—a novella really—but beautifully written by Normal Maclean. And because the story involves a Presbyterian pastor's son, I found my place within the family of the novel.

The story is a fictionalized autobiography. It is told with Norman's voice as he looks back on when he and his brother Paul were in their 30s. Norman had some hard memories, like when he worked in logging camps with a rough crowd to pay his way through school. Hard work...., sometimes fighting was a diversion from the hard work and Norman would find himself in the middle. Yet, with the perspective of time and distance, Norman can see something beautiful in how he grew up.

And then there was the hardest experience of all. Paul, his fun, mischievous and adventurous brother, had a tendency to put himself in the wrong places with the wrong people and a day came when he was the victim of a high stakes poker game where he could not pay his debt. Paul's murder was devastating to the family—to Norman.

But after many years, Paul's death no longer defined his life and here's how Norman explains why. He remembers a message painted on the wall of a Sunday School class: “**God is Love.**” He remembers that message as if it were painted just for his family. He and his brothers were both high-spirited and feisty. Their boisterous behavior stressed their mother, and Paul's propensity to make poor choices vexed their father. But love and faith defined the family, even when they could not understand each other. And love and faith, for them, was like a saw that cut through even their hardest experience revealing what was beautiful about having Paul in their lives, even though Paul's life was cut short.

What lingers for Norman as defining memories is not the memory of Paul's dying. It's other memories that inspired gratitude for having known Paul... like the last time Father and sons go fishing before Paul's death. He remembers it as being *perfect*- perfect because each was trying to take care of the others in their own way. Then the scene becomes “*more perfect.*” Maclean was an English professor, so he knew not to use the phrase “more perfect.” Yet he couldn't think of any other way of describing how “best” can become “better” than when he proceeded to out-fish his brother Paul, a rare event. When Paul playfully threw stones around Norman to spoil his fishing, Norman knew he would never feel better than how he felt right then.

It is something of a miracle when some can remember truly hard times like that. The Great Depression was crushing for many who lived in Appalachia. Some never got past the trauma of their childhood poverty. Yet, others can remember their hard childhood and speak genuinely of gratitude for the people who lived through it with them and for lessons of life learned.

Veteran's Day was last weekend. Some who fought in the Vietnam war still haven't recovered. Some victims of assault still can't get over feeling victimized. Sometimes the hard edge



of life feels like it has become the center, defining life, robbing joy. I will not criticize or judge anyone for not seeing past the hard crust. Sometimes only a miracle of God can cut through.

But Paul experienced that miracle. He sees the center and tries to provide a sharp saw to cut through the crust in what he writes in our passage.

In saying that, I'm going with those scholars who believe that Paul wrote Colossians, and that Paul wrote Colossians at the end of his ministry. If that is the case, it would be understandable if Paul dwells on the hard times of his life and is better:

- how his focused and purposeful life was upended on the road to Damascus and how it was a hard and difficult process to see how he, in the name of God, had been an enemy of God and that he needed to join in the cause of those he had been persecuting,
- how he had to survive a shipwreck that wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been on a journey in the cause,
- how he had to endure jailings and beatings because of the cause.

Paul's life of faith, you see, has had its own hard crust.

But Paul has the vision to see the beauty past the crust, and it is that vision he shares in the passage I read. At the climax of the passage, Paul says that in Christ, "[all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.](#)" God is not so turned off by the crusty, pitted, edges of our lives—not so traumatized by our sin—that God has decided that it is for the best to have nothing to do with us. "[No,](#)" Paul says. God is actually pleased to dwell among us flawed, foolish people who often make decisions that vex him. Just as Norman and his parents were pleased to call Paul a beloved brother and son, so is God pleased to call us "heirs." "Children."

Then Paul tries to do what is impossible to do, and that is explain the mystery of God dwelling among us in Christ.

- He uses phrases like "[first-born of all creation.](#)"
- He says that in Christ, "[all things were created, in heaven and earth, visible and invisible.](#)"
- He says, "[Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together.](#)"
- He says, "[Christ is the beginning, the first-born,](#)" that "[Christ is preeminent,](#)" and that in him, "[all things hold together.](#)"

What wonderful, mysterious phrases. In the timespan of a sermon—in the timespan of my life—I cannot begin to understand, much less explain, what all they mean. But I'll try. I'll turn crystals into crust and say something.

I think that Paul is talking about that *Cosmic Christ* of whom Peter Enns spoke. Paul sees Christ as the center of everything.

- All of our lives might be about living until we die.
but Christ is about how we live even though we die.
- Our lives might be a striving to prove that we are enough in someone eyes... or at least in our own,
but Christ lets us know we are enough already in God's eyes,



so we can live as God's children.

- Christ is the center that holds the universe together.

Wow, that's almost too big a thing to say to even repeat. But maybe what it means is that no matter how we live, or we die, no matter if sometimes what is hard becomes too heavy to bear, there ultimately is nothing that is difficult; or worse, hurtful; or worse still, evil; is going to have the last word.

There will be a Thanksgiving celebration for all creation because while what is hard may sometimes seem to define the edge, the grace, mercy, and peace of God in Christ will never surrender the center.

I recognize that some have had to live at the edges more than others, that life has been unfair in its distribution of burdens. I realize that so often the words, "You should be thankful" are said too early to those who have suffered greatly. But I cling to Paul's hope that someday, maybe beyond the limits of ones' days on earth, all of creation will be thankful.

I dare to hope,
even the most victimized will know thanksgiving.

For if Paul is right,
God in Christ will make every life,
no matter how short, tragic, hard, or regret-filled-
every life
reach its completion through the healing of reconciliation.

I also know there are others of you in a season where the beautiful center of life is, for now, wonderfully in view. You have this knowing—
not intellectual knowing, but the knowing that comes of being loved—
that God sees you... remembers you... with all your flaws...
as someone God loves.

If that is the case, I don't have to stand here and tell you to give thanks. That would be like telling someone hungry to eat. Some things don't need to be commanded.

I do hope that, come Thursday, we remember that there needs to be a day of Thanksgiving for all. So, I hope you remember to say a prayer for those who are in war zones or other places of oppression who cannot know anything right now but the hard edge. Say a prayer for them, so they may see a day soon when they can freely give thanks. Then, notice those you are with and those who are not. Notice everyone who is at your table. I am talking about a metaphorical table where



all those of your life are present. Remember those who are physically not present but lovingly remembered. Knowing Christ is also at your table, give thanks... if you can.

