

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 24/25, 2010

“Fully Fulfilled”

Colossians 2:6-15

There's a principle in Biblical interpretation called “progressive fulfillment.” It's a principle that applies to prophecy. It says that there can be various levels of fulfillment to a particular prophecy – one level that applies to the immediate situation – another level that applies to sometime in the near future – and still another level that applies to the end of time. You can think of it like a glass that's being filled with water – a little at first, more and more after that, until finally the glass is fully filled.

Perhaps the best way to understand this principle is to apply it to a well-known Old Testament prophecy. Take God's promises to Abraham for example. As you may remember, God chose Abraham to be His own and He made several promises to him – promises concerning descendants, concerning land, and concerning a Savior. Now, that promise was, in part, fulfilled when Isaac, Abraham's son, was born and, it was more fully fulfilled, in part, when Abraham's descendants entered the Promised Land and, then, in the fullness of time, it was more fully fulfilled when a Savior, Jesus Christ was born to one of Abraham's descendants and it will be most fully fulfilled when this Jesus comes again to take all those who are Abraham's descendants by faith to the promised land of heaven.

One of my professors at the sem used to call this principle of “progressive fulfillment”, the “now and the not yet.” What that means, simply, is that we have some of what God has promised even now but we don't have it fully, at least not yet.

This same principle, no matter what you may call it, is a principle that applies to the whole of the Christian faith and life. Think about it. In baptism God claims us and makes us His own in Christ. Through baptism we die to sin and are buried with Christ so that in him we might be raised to a new life. And by baptism God promises that all that Christ earned through his life, death and resurrection, is now ours by grace through faith. And as we live in Christ, as Paul says in our epistle lesson, as we are rooted and built up in him, as we are strengthened in the faith, we grow in receiving more and more of what Christ has earned for us. We continue to grow until, finally, when we are taken from this world – either by death or Christ's return – we receive the fullness of our baptism in heaven. Then, and only then, will the promise God made at baptism be fully fulfilled.

It's kind of like a trust fund that a parent might establish for his or her child. Money is put away in that child's name – it belongs to that child but the child cannot have it, at least not yet. And over the years, as that child grows to maturity, allotments may be made for the child through the administrator of that trust until finally the child is no child any longer and that which is in the trust is theirs fully.

In a way, that's what our faith and life are like. God established a trust fund for us when we were adopted by Him in our baptism into Christ and all the blessings of his life, death and resurrection, we set aside for us. Over the years, as we grow in faith, we draw a portion of those blessings – just like we're doing today in worship – until finally, if we remain faithful to the end, those blessings will be ours in full. And that's heaven. It's not that we'll have anything there that we don't already have here – it's just that we will have it there fully.

I think that's what Paul is saying in our lesson. Just as in Christ all the fullness of the Godhead lives in bodily form so also all those who believe and trust in Christ, all who receive him not only as their Savior from sin but also as the Lord of their life, have been given all fullness in him. This fullness is power and authority over sin, death and the power of the devil. And as believers draw on that power and authority by faith through Word and Sacrament, so even now we have the forgiveness of sins, an abundant life, and the promise of the resurrection and strength to withstand the devil himself. And, of course, in the end, that power and authority will be fully exercised in heaven.

And so, in the meantime, in the midst of this “progressive fulfillment”, between the “now and the not yet”, Paul encourages believers to be faithful and to see to it that no one takes them captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than Christ.

And what was true when Paul first wrote those words is true today. Believers are still in danger of losing what is already theirs in Christ by being taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophy – the philosophy of the world. In fact, it happens all the time. For when believers forsake, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, “the assembly of themselves together” – that is, when believers neglect or reject worship, Holy Communion, studying and applying God's Word in Scripture, service, witnessing and fellowshiping with other members of the body of Christ – when they neglect or reject drawing on that power and authority of Christ through Word and Sacrament – they open themselves up to being deceived by the world and led astray. And if they are, then they forfeit the full fulfillment of God's promises to them for this life and for the life to come. In effect, they lose their trust because they've lost their trust.

It's with this in mind that the Word of God would encourage each and every one of us to be persistent in living out our Christian faith – to not take it for granted – to continue to ask and seek and knock in faith as today's Gospel lesson encourages us to do – lest we be found wanting as were many in our Old Testament lesson – until finally we receive the fullness of all that Christ has done for us in heaven.

May God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.