

Happy Resurrection-Birthday!

Sermon on Colossians 3:1-4 by Tilman Gerber

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12 weeks - that's how long my wife and I have been proud to bring the youngest attendant to NewSong events. Of course, we are still thrilled about the new life in our home. I mean, 3 months ago - our baby Sarah wasn't there yet! Well, to be precise, she was there already - even last year. We just couldn't see her! Alright, to be very precise, we could see her a couple of times thanks to the doctor and ultrasound technology. Still, the day of birth made all the difference! There was nothing like this overwhelming joy when I first saw her directly in front of me. She is real! What a miracle! I can't believe I am a father now - I need to take a selfie with her!

Now, you may think: "Good for you, but is it really worth interrupting the music for telling us about babies?" Well, I thought it is necessary because we've just sung "I am a child of God" and perhaps some of you find it difficult to relate to that. To be honest, I think there are easier lines to sing for me too. Some may be able to repeat it over and over again until it feels real. As for me, that doesn't work. Sarah became real to me on the 29th of January - not necessarily through that selfie. Nevertheless, proof pictures are helpful to know: This is reality!

So I have a simple explanation for my problem: Children of human parents really become visible on the day of birth. Children of God really become visible on the day of resurrection! Some say that they are there already - just as Sarah was there already during pregnancy - but there is no technology to make visible what's growing spiritually. However, to be precise again, God has sent us one "proof picture" actually!

... (Video Clip: youtu.be/TDCLRQtVdHE)

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation..." "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead..." These powerful lyrics are taken from the Bible, from the New Testament, from the Epistle to the Colossians. There, in chapters 1 and 2, Jesus Christ is introduced as God's Image - but also as God's Mystery. I like that!

So why is he God's Image? He is the first of God's children, begotten at the very beginning so that his involvement in creation was the first step to make God visible - through *diversity*! Then, he took on human flesh and blood so that his work of reconciliation was the second step to make God visible - through *unity*! So that's why he is God's Image.

But why is he God's Mystery? The Epistle to the Colossians talks about Christ being in all and about everyone being in Christ. All of us are supposed to be members of His spiritual body. So the church has tried to make this visible - both creative diversity and reconciled unity - but so far, it's been difficult for a majority to see that. I know church expressions that are quite good at diversity AND unity actually. And there are some that are at least good at creativity OR reconciliation. I think we can understand though when people say: "I've been to church but I haven't seen anything. Surely they did their best to hide Jesus from me - if he was there at all."

Indeed, Jesus Christ is the only one who can get his head around that! He is the only one who already had his visible resurrection day. It is called Easter and we celebrated it recently. Still, Easter was an *anticipation* of the end. Mysteriously, after Easter is before Easter! For the church, Easter is yet to come! So every church member finds himself or herself in a pregnancy-like process - somewhere between being spiritually conceived and spiritually born. Or in the words of Colossians: He or she is raised with Christ already by mystery, but not yet by image.

So this introduction should help to get the right perspective on the second half of the Epistle. There, Colossians becomes very practical. Chapter 3 starts with this summary (Verse 1-4, NIV):

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

I don't know if you can relate to that but I think it sounds very much like what I am experiencing: I am living in this tension between an old and a new way of life. And it exactly feels like attending my own burial, like witnessing my own death! I admit that sounds quite dramatic and I don't have time to share my story in detail tonight. The truth is: I have tried many times to become a better person. I have tried to apply the human principles of self-improvement. I have tried not to give up... So to cut a long story short: The more I've been losing faith in myself, the more I've been finding faith in Christ. He is the best improvement that has ever happened to me - and to the people around me!

My wife, of course, can tell every day where my mind is set on. If set on earthly things, she gets a day with my old, filthy and impure self. If set on where Christ is, she gets a day with my new, wise and grateful heart. Both old and new life co-exist at this stage. And Colossians not only talks about individuals. One can also tell where a society is set on. At the time of the New Testament, people set on earthly things caused hatred and fear between the Jews and the Greek, between the slaves and the free. In contrast to that, Christ formed a new body with members set on things above, a church that is called to peace and love instead of those divisions. And until today, we need to be reminded of that. In the 20th century, for example, a black preacher did so. His name was Martin Luther King and he found beautiful words for this contrast between old and new:

"Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it." (From: Antidotes for Fear / In: Strength to Love / 1963)

So tonight you may have entered this place with paralysis, confusion and darkness. My prayer is for you to leave this place with release, harmony and illumination! When you came in, you may have been identifying yourself with a slave to fear. My prayer is for you to go out identifying yourself with a child of God.

I don't know about you, but I am expecting bursts of spiritual growth and even spiritual procreation of new spiritual embryos tonight. I don't know if or when you have entered this spiritual pregnancy and I don't know what stage you are at right now. Sometimes, I can detect that there is something alive and kickin' because I know some of you better. Apart from that, the new life in Christ is his invisible mystery, a hidden matter between God and you. If Christ is your life, however, Colossians promises that you will appear with him in glory, in his visible image. Then, you will celebrate your "Happy Resurrection-Birthday" - and looking forward to that makes it much easier to sing "I am a child of God" even now!

So as I am handing over the microphone to the worship band again, You are invited to set your heart and mind on things above, on where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. You may want to simply sing along with the worship team. You may also want to read Colossians yourself in your bible or on your smartphone. And in addition, you are invited to lay down earthly things that you want to be free from. You may want to do this symbolically by coming to the cross here at the front. You may also want to pray with the ministry team at both sides to be delivered from those things.

As for me, my last word is *not my word* nor a quote from church history - it's the voice of Jesus himself recorded in all the four gospels (Mt 10:39; cf. Mk 8:35, Lk 17:33, Jn 12:25 and more):

"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it."