

**Ordinary People**  
**Colossians 4**  
**Don Lincoln**

In college I had a pair of blue jeans I loved and wore ALL the time. They were Levi's cargo jeans – extra pockets, flaps, snaps – super comfortable. With flannel shirts and hiking boots that was campus wear every day and those jeans were my second skin. But wearing them that often, they started to get worn. Threadbare in the knees, wallet wore a hole in one pocket, keys had worn through another. The seat had gotten beyond dangerously thin. Unlike today, jeans with holes in them were definitely not cool.

I looked for new ones just like them, but Levi's stopped making them. (Don't you hate that!). Couldn't find them anywhere. No internet, Amazon, or E-Bay – I would've paid good money to buy a new pair.

I was home the summer between Junior and Senior years, and happened to notice as I was taking out the trash, under some newspapers, a hint of blue denim, and I reached in and it was MY JEANS! My mom had thrown them away. I rescued them, and asked her why, and she said, "You can't be seen wearing those things – they're worn out and nearly indecent!"

Now, you need to know my mom had put plenty of patches on the knees of jeans over the years. And when they got too beat up, they became cut-off shorts. We REPAIRED things in our household. My father replaced every part of our washing machine – motor, drum, knobs, door hinges, agitator – until it was so old they no longer had parts for it. But clearly my mother considered my favorite jeans beyond repair.

So.....that's when I taught myself to sew! Taking the legs my mother had saved from a pair of cutoff jeans – saved in order to make knee patches – I constructed patches for the front pocket, the rear pocket, both knees, the top of the watch pocket, both cheeks, if you will, of the seat of the pants. I learned all kinds of things along the way – like folding the edge of a patch under so it wouldn't fray. And how to use a thimble (after I tried to push a needle through four layers of denim on a pocket seam!). Before I finally tossed them myself those jeans had 21 patches.

But what I learned most was with that simple thread – which by itself is not very strong – that thread, in even, closely-spaced stitches, will hold two pieces of cloth together very firmly, and withstand all kinds of pressure. A single stitch – spread far apart – is very weak. But enough of them close together are incredibly strong.

That's the image I have of the closing of this letter to the Colossians. Paul is stitching together his own little group in Ephesus, in the prison itself and among the friends who visit him there – stitching them together with the little group of Christians in Colossae.<sup>1</sup> But let's step back a moment.....

As one colleague says, after all the soaring language in Colossians – the Cosmic Christ, the Mystery of God revealed in Jesus, and being rooted and grounded in God’s love – after that incredibly rich and powerful language, the end of the letter is painfully ordinary.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it’s so painfully ordinary, it doesn’t show up in the lectionary – the three-year cycle of Bible passages that we use to preach. In 39 years, I’ve NEVER preached on it. My guess is that’s because it’s almost like reading a family email, or a Christmas card. Listen to it as it might sound today....

Tychicus will tell you about everything that’s going on with me. Onesimus – you remember him; he’s from your town. He’s coming back with Tychicus. Man, has he got some stories to tell you.

By the way, **Aristarchus** says hello. **Mark**, Barnabas’ cousin – remember you got a message about him? He says “Hi.” He may be coming your way. **Jesus** – not the one you’re thinking of, but the guy they call Justus – he says hello too. Epaphras, your pastor, sends his greeting. I’m so glad he’s here, but let me tell you, he’s always, always praying for you. Oh, and Luke says hey. You remember him – the doctor? He sends his best, and Demas says hello too.

Well, listen, I’ve gotta run. Say hi to everybody there. Tell Nympha and her friends hello. And make sure you swap letters with the folks over in Laodicea. Oh, I almost forgot, make sure to tell Archippus to finish that project he was working on! Don’t forget now. I’m in prison. Buh-bye.

What I found this week, however, is that it’s this very closing, that stitches together the ordinary folks of Christian community, that makes this last chapter such a blessing.

For instance, the first person Paul mentions is Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister and fellow servant. We first meet Tychicus in Acts 20 as part of Paul’s multi-ethnic, multi-national mission team. He shows up in Colossians, Ephesians, 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, and Titus. What is Tychicus doing? He’s delivering letters. He’s Paul’s mailman. That’s his ministry. It’s a simple ministry; it’s not dramatic, it’s in the background. But it needs to be done. That’s ordinary Tychicus.

With him is Onesimus. You may not know this, but he was a runaway slave – who is being sent back home by Paul. That’s who is accompanying the mailman, travelling the hundred miles or so inland not only to deliver the letter but to provide first-hand human contact, to be able to talk with folks about how things are going with Paul, a major thread of two ordinary guys that will bind these two groups of Christians together.<sup>3</sup> They’re probably carrying a letter from Paul to Philemon too – Onesimus’ master – but that’s another sermon.

Paul sends greetings from Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus – and mentions circumcision. These are Paul’s Jewish co-workers. Why would he mention that? If you were here a few weeks ago, when we were talking about the struggles happening in Colossae, there were false teachers trying to lead them astray with Jewish ceremonial laws, Sabbath laws, new moons, and festivals. It was tense in Colossae. Paul says, “Let me stitch you together with these three Jewish friends of mine so that you will know they believe you have everything you need. Nothing else needs to be added. They are stitched together with you and with me, rooting you on in the church in Colossae”.

Of those three – Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus – you may not know that Mark is someone with whom Paul had a falling out on an earlier missionary journey. Paul sent him packing –

sent Mark home. “Go, just go. I don’t want you around!” Paul writes here, “If Mark – cousin of Barnabas – concerning whom you have received some instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him.” I’m guessing in the instructions, Paul said, “Mark and I are reconciled; he’s OK. He belongs with us.” Ordinary people – even people with whom we have difficulty – stitched together in Christian community.

Epaphras is another vital thread weaving these people together. He’s from Colossae, and is the one who heard the Gospel from Paul in the first place, and shared it with his friends in Colossae. Epaphras was, if you will, their first pastor; the church planter of Nympha’s church. He didn’t have a masters of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary – perhaps NO formal education – but he was the founding pastor of the church meeting in Nympha’s home. An ordinary citizen, but the bearer of Good News to the town of Colossae that is now bearing fruit. He’s now in Ephesus, ministering to Paul in prison, but at the same time praying fervently for the folks back home.

You know, every day, there are like 80 people on Westminster’s Prayer Chain – and every single day they are lifting in prayer the members and friends of this congregation. Ordinary people – some in this room, and some who cannot even get to worship anymore – but who are doing work like Epaphras – praying fervently for the church – and if your name ends up on the list they’ll pray for you too – stitching us together in petitions before God.

Paul keeps stitching. Luke and Demas send greetings – make sure you say hello to Nympha. And then a commendation to be in touch with other churches nearby. He tells them he’s written a letter to the church in Laodicea, just a few miles away from Colossae. When the letters have been read, they should swap them, and read each other’s. Like the letter to Ephesians we studied last summer, these were to be circular letters. It’s possible the letter we call “Ephesians” is the original letter to Laodicea.

Almost as an afterthought, Paul reminds them to encourage Archippus in his task. We don’t know what his task is, but Paul is stitching together this community so they will be both an encouragement to one another – and hold each other accountable for the task they’ve been given to serve the gospel in their place.

The point is the thousand different ways ordinary Christians belong to one another in mutual love, prayer, and service. Stitched together in the body of Christ. There is no such thing as “going it alone as a Christian” – thinking you have nothing to gain or benefit from other Christians or other churches. And clearly, Paul is just as concerned to maintain his personal relationships with the ordinary people of Colossae as he is to expound high-flying theology.<sup>4</sup>

My daughter recently moved from Boston, where she has lived most of the last 15 years, to Cleveland, Ohio, to take a faculty position at Case Western Reserve University. She doesn’t know anyone, has been there a few weeks by herself; students aren’t back, so it’s lonely on campus. But never fear, because Sarah Hope has always sought out a church home, wherever she has lived. Not every preacher’s kid does that but this one happens to. And there’s a beautiful, huge Presbyterian church right around the corner from her apartment, right on the edge of campus.

She’s attended worship twice. Not once has anybody said “boo” to her. No greeting, no welcome, no “so nice to see you,” no “I’m not sure we’ve met, I’m Don Lincoln, tell me who

you are.” Not one. Really? In a day when churches across the country are saying, “We want more young people to be a part of the life of the church” – you don’t greet a single, 35-year-old who comes to Sunday worship? **It’s why we’re putting on nametags every week.** To try to stitch ourselves together in community; in fellowship.

Perhaps you’ve heard the saying, “If you find the perfect church, don’t join it. You’ll ruin it!” It’s true. No church is perfect. Every church has ordinary people. Ordinary people like you and me who make mistakes and fall short. We have quirky edges and rough edges and growing edges; we have to seek one another’s forgiveness and forbearance. And yet...

By God’s grace these same ordinary people are the body of Christ. After all, that’s what truly stitches the Colossians together with Paul. Jesus Christ. Remember from the first chapter, Paul says, “in Jesus **ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER.**” What a great image, there’s the stitching – Jesus – that binds us in community. And because of that, when the burdens of one grow heavy, another helps carry them. When one is afraid, another holds a light. When one is anxious, another speaks peace. When one is faltering, another spurs them on. When one is weeping, another weeps with them. When one is laughing, another laughs with them.<sup>5</sup> And when your life feels like that worn out pair of jeans that you’re ready to throw in the trash, there are people who will help you hold on until a new day comes. The inexhaustible riches of Christ, manifest in ordinary people.

Paul writes about this Cosmic Christ, and it’s clear that when you have a right relationship with the cosmic Christ, it manifests itself in the real, concrete, everyday relationships of ordinary people like you and me.<sup>6</sup> We all need the reassurance of being greeted and made welcome. We all need words of approval and commendation for tasks we’ve done and people reminding us when we’ve got a task that still needs to be completed. We all need people to pray for us – fervently.

By the love of God, and our expressions of that love to one another, we are stitched together into whole cloth of the Body of Christ that does those very things – day in and day out.

When I looked at this text and looked at what my last assignment in this preaching series was and I thought, Oh man, Tychicus and Aristarchus... with all the soaring, magnificent language we’ve been preaching about all these weeks in Colossians, I was hoping there might be this equally soaring benediction. Paul writes like that at times. He closes one letter like this:

“Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling, and present you faultless, with exceeding joy, to the only wise God.” I was looking for that.

But perhaps, listing these ordinary people is Paul’s REAL benediction – that **you and I** are to be God’s benediction – God’s blessings – to one another, stitched together by the saving Grace of Jesus Christ, and sent to share it with the world.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. NT Wright, Paul for Everyone, *The Prison Letters*; commentary on Colossians 4.
2. Patrick Johnson, First Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC; sermon on Colossians 4, August, 2016.
3. NT Wright, op. cit.

4. *ibid.*
5. Johnson, *op. cit.*
6. The New Interpreters Bible, Commentary on Colossians 4.

Benediction:

*In 39 years of preaching, I think I've mentioned all the ordinary people along the way who've touched my life and taught me the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like Lewe Mizelle, and Art Every, two elders in the church I grew up in, who led the singing for first, second, and third graders and taught me that it was OK for guys to sing out loud in church.*

*For Ed Rapp, who asked me when I was in high school to teach Sunday school in the summer. It terrified the daylights out of me but I found out what a joy it was to open God's word to young people. Hu Auburn, a young, associate pastor who came to our church, from whom I learned that ministers were actually ordinary people, believe it or not. And an ordinary couple named Don and Carolyn Lincoln, who lived the gospel of Jesus Christ daily, and showed me what His love was about.*

*I know you have them too. Give thanks to God today for the ordinary people in your life and BE them for somebody else today, tomorrow, the next day and all of the days ahead.*

*May the love of God, the joy of Christ, and the abiding and empowering presence of God's Spirit be in, with, and through all of us this day and every day. Amen.*