

Christ: No More, No Less
Colossians 1:15-29
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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/christ-no-more-no-less/>

Things Fall Apart. When I was a senior in high school, I read a book by Chinua Achebe with this title. I recently got curious and learned that “things fall apart” is a line made famous by poet W.B. Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming,” written 100 years ago in 1919 in the wake of the first world war.¹ Humanity’s capacity for worldwide destruction and death more visible than ever.

“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.”

“...the center cannot hold.”

Things fall apart.

We are living in a things-fall-apart world. Now more than ever, we are aware of shortcomings, failure, and evil. Population through the roof. Political breakdown. Nation-state tension. Resource depletion. Media frenzy. We face more questions of survival than any previous generation.

If only the church were immune. While I was in seminary, the Pew Research Center published their 2014 Religious Landscape Study, which tells us what we already know, but struggle to face: the decline in American religious affiliation is stark, jumping exponentially with each decade. Because we are uncertain and anxious, we allow our vision to be clouded by the divided times in which we live. We lower our gaze to things that are not Christ. We are not in our best collective frame of mind to respond to the questions, challenges and opportunities at hand.

Things fall apart.

In my imaginary memoir, the chapter chronicling the last two years of my life bears the title, “Things Fall Apart”. As some of you know, our family welcomed our third child in 2018. Every child expands our universe in ways that stretch us, but my pregnancy, recovery, and adjustment to life with three children pushed me into new and uncomfortable territory.

The dog crate in our basement is really the perfect image for my chapter, “Things Fall Apart.” This crate has served us well for nine years. But with time, and repeated slobber, the latch has

¹ W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>; accessed July 10, 2019.

begun to rust and malfunction. But only at 8:50am, Monday through Friday, when I'm frantically trying to load all three children in the car to run into school exactly four seconds before the bell rings and the doors lock. Every. Morning.

In order to lock the dog in the crate you must hold the four pieces in place and turn the rusty knob at exactly the right time. All while the children scream and fight in the car, the dog pants and slobbers all over my hands, and I rehash again how I cannot get control of my morning routine. I play the "Things Fall Apart" soundtrack in my head; my favorite song is "The Universe Conspires Against Me."

I yelled. I was impatient and unreasonable. I tried to carry too many things to the car at once, and spilled coffee in my car, over and over again. I cried in the car rider line. I tried to force the crate and our morning routine, sure I could make the pieces click together.

But they didn't.

Things fall apart.

You know, the people of the early church lived in a time when things fall apart. The first Christians lived under social, political, and economic duress. They lived an unprivileged existence, labeled troublemakers, atheists, agitators. They lived in the minority, and on the margins.

If anyone had the right to claim the "Things Fall Apart" soundtrack as their own, if anyone had the right to complain, they did.

But when they humbly and bravely gathered on resurrection day each week to pray, and share in the communion meal, they sang a different song.

We are blessed to have a few of their early hymns, written before the Gospels, before the Epistles, before the time of Paul. Colossians 1:15-20 is believed to be one of them. Surely it was written by crazy people, because they sang about a reality beyond political, ethnic, and religious division, beyond the powers, rulers, and authorities, a world where all is reconciled, healed, held together in Christ. "in *him*, all things hold together."

All things hold together?

It's interesting, the first Christians did not pass down to us their financial statements, growth strategies, or their attendance statistics.

What they passed down to us is an understanding of faith as a matter of choice: choosing to entrust their lives to Christ, choosing to make Christ the object of their hopes, the focus of their daily life.

Colossians 3, the Message paraphrase begins: "So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life in Christ...pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up and be alert to what is going on around Christ...see things from his perspective."

Just when we think we've got a pretty good handle on it all, God invites us deeper still. I don't know about you, but I would prefer to be more in control, well-informed about what God is up to, to feel more "superior and saved" as Richard Rohr puts it. But faith is more about choosing than it is about feeling. God's transforming work is a force all its own, thank goodness and oh dear.

And so, the question is the same as always: will we choose to see Christ and to trust Christ?

Christ helped me to see and to trust more deeply this year by inviting me to unclench my hands and again empty myself of the need to be on top of everything, the master of time. As I am sure you could hear earlier, the letting go is not without frustration, tears, or loss. But it is required by faith.

Changing the way we see is some of the hardest work.

Does God really expecting us to hold all the pieces together, just so, and turn the knob at exactly, until our arms start trembling and we are paralyzed by failure and fear? Or are we instead invited to see differently: to visualize ourselves held in the hands of Christ. And to trust: in Christ's hands to let the pieces go for a moment, in faith. For just a moment to release the worst-case-scenarios, the judgments, the impossible load, so that Jesus might have a little space to give us grace, or forgiveness, or a dream for the future? "In *him* all things hold together."

Dear church, what is the invitation for us?

During his ministry, Jesus restored sight to the physically blind. He also conflicted with and ultimately was killed by leaders who refused to see and to trust that God might be doing something new.

What if our invitation is to see the world as Christ sees? The Bible envisions the church to be Christ's body. That would make us collectively the eyes of Christ.

The view is not always pretty. If you're anything like me, you prefer to look away when you see something that makes you uncomfortable.

To see the world in 2019 as it is, feels sort of like looking directly into the sun. The physical and spiritual hunger, poverty, and slavery in our world are immense. The divisive spirit is heart-breaking. The questions before us are like none faced before in history.

Yet, we are the eyes of Christ. We must open our eyes to what is, in our souls, our lives, in the world. We must see the pain, the longing, the need, the impasse. We must bear witness to stories different from our own. We must allow our seeing to lead us to repentance so that, through the power of Christ, we will see the future, the hope, the bridges to the other side.

Our invitation is to see, and to *trust*.

Church, Christ is holding us together. We do not have to be paralyzed with fear. The object of our faith is not our institutional survival, the object of our faith is Christ. In *him* all things hold together.

When we understand ourselves as held together, secure, we are free. We are free to take risks, to embrace change, to find fellowship with people who are different than us, to allow Christ to dream big dreams through us, to embrace fully the pace at which Christ is making those dreams a reality, because it is not we who are going to accomplish them, but Christ in us.

In the same way a child flourishes developmentally when she feels secure in her parents' care, so we can flourish when we view ourselves as held together in Christ.

Trust brings Christ's body to maturity. At full maturity, Christ's body is the arms that hold, nourish, and build the world; the legs carrying humanity and creation to the space God has prepared for us, beyond our present division and brokenness to the place where there is only love, peace, hope, and joy.

Church, the question is not whether Christ's body, will exist in the future. The question is not whether there will ever be justice, equality, peace, reconciliation of all things. The question, rather, is whether we are going to be a part of it.

So, may we go from here seeing—see what is, the truth of what's inside you and out there, the brutality and the beauty. Go from here trusting—may we step out of our comfort zones, listen to a different perspective, choose to be bridge-builders rather than bridge-burners, working for reconciliation rather than feeding division, allowing Christ to invite us deeper still into transformation, into love.

Things fall apart is a convincing storyline.

But by faith, we are seeing and trusting that, in him all things hold together.

In Christ; no more, no less.

Amen.