



Strong Roots for Tender Shoots

Colossians 2:6-8

A sermon for Campus Ministry 100 celebrations

I arrive on campus for freshman orientation. Exciting stuff. I look around at all the new faces and new places. New challenges, new opportunities. My heart's beating pretty fast, kind of nervous, but looking forward to this new chapter of my life.

Take a look at the bulletin board. Wow. Lots going on already right away the first week! Animal Behavior Club – that sounds kind of interesting. Hands on experience with animals – might help with my biology degree. Big Dawg Fishing – that's D.A.W.G. – competitive bass fishing tournaments? Sign me up! CRU – I see a cross and a whole bunch of people signed up – I've always kind of wondered what it is other churches teach and never really had a chance to explore that on my own. Gender Sexuality Alliance – don't tell anyone, but it wouldn't hurt just to get on their email list, right?

You can find data in different places which tells us that the first few weeks of college are when students form habits which will last them the rest of their time on campus and depending on the habits, a lot longer than that even after school. Those are not exaggerated numbers. Students see the WELS logo at a freshman orientation booth and say, "Hi I'm so and so from such and such – I went to Lakeside, or Kettle Moraine Lutheran, or Fox Valley Lutheran, my home church is over here or there." Fantastic, can we get your contact information? And many do provide the particulars. But some - some you see once and that's it – some you don't see ever. Some don't give contact information. You wonder how many walk by, knowing they should stop and say, "hi," knowing mom or dad or grandma or grandpa or pastor back home said be sure to look them up when you get there - but don't thinking, "It's a new stage in my life now, I don't have to do anything I don't want to do anymore."

This September we are celebrating 100 years of Campus Ministry in the WELS and all the blessings that have come from it. And we'd like to take some time today to ask you to continue to pray for and support WELS Campus Ministry all the more for the next 100 years, Lord willing, as we look to continue to expand to new areas, assist congregations and pastors and laypeople as they work with collegians and enhance what God has already blessed us with up to this day!

Our text for consideration today is from Colossians chapter 2 - **⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.**

Northwestern Publishing House has a program called "Strong Roots for Tender Shoots." Perhaps you are familiar with it. The goal of the program is to assist parents in helping to bring and keep their young children in Christ – from pre-birth to age 4. What an appropriate name for that program. How important it is for any young plant to develop a strong root system – without it how quickly the plant will at the very least not be as fruitful as it could, and at the worst it will die.

I would suggest the name for that program is something that can be just as easily applied to our students in the realm of campus ministry. Every year we have a public examination and prepare for confirmation of our 8th grade students. We do a big review of the whole Catechism. The main points from all the chief parts. Why is it important that Jesus was both God and man? What is the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion? What does

your baptism mean to you? And on and on. And more often than not, come examination day, the students study up, they know the right answers, they confess the right answers, and confess their faith publicly and voila! They're confirmed – faithful to the point of death is the promise, right? I will give my life rather than fall away from the teachings of God's Word!

It's no secret that when you travel down the halls of different churches and view pictures of confirmation classes of old it's not great news. A few years ago the WELS Committee for Congregational Counseling conducted a study that was presented at Synod convention – here is a quote from that document. **From 2005 through 2010 there were 40,580 baptisms in WELS, children who would be ages 6 to 11 at the end of 2016. Yet, the demographic survey showed WELS had only 20,730 members in that demographic at the end of 2016, a decline of 34.66%. That percent decline increases in high-school and college years to just over 47%. It peaks with the Millennial generation at approximately 54%. Approximately 20 years ago, it was estimated that WELS lost about 40% to 45% of its youth confirmands by the time they finished college. Today, it appears to be closer to 50%.**

The congregation in Colossae was no stranger to the struggle that new or young Christians deal with on a daily basis. Some of the things they would have heard would be something like – “I mean, is it really that big a deal if you still follow the laws you've been following for 1500 years re: circumcision, religious festivals, the Sabbath? Doesn't it make sense that you need to keep doing those things – I mean, Jesus did, right?” “You know what REALLY makes God happy? There's certain things you shouldn't taste and certain things you shouldn't touch – and when you deprive yourself of those things you show God just how committed you are to him.” “What about worshipping angels? They're powerful beings aren't they? Wouldn't hurt just in case, right?” “We can't know if this Jesus character was really truly God, right? If he was, why would he ever let all those terrible things happen to him?” And clearly some, if not many, were buying in to some of that stuff! Some of it seems to make sense! **These hollow and deceptive philosophies, which depend on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.**

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In dealing with collegians for the past 10 or so years I have to say that not many of them have observed that the way it's portrayed in the movies is what they've experienced. On film, Professor So and So says on day one that if you're a Christian it is my goal in life to make you not one anymore by the end of this class. I don't know if it's good or bad that this isn't what happens. It does seem to coincide with how Satan works though. Not always a full frontal attack, but he chips away, little by little, piece by piece. A compromise here and a compromise there. I'm so lonely away from home – I need something to fill that void...what will it be? A relationship? A job? Beer? Sports? Where does God's Word fit in? I have SO many people around me who believe SO opposite of what I believe regarding things like gender and sexuality and the sanctity of life and heaven and hell and God and the devil and morality in general! Is it possible that I can be right, and they ALL are wrong? Or maybe I'm the one who has it wrong? These men and women who are teaching me every day have a lot of letters behind their names and they are the experts – they never affirm biblical principles that I have lived by my whole life – in fact a lot of what they declare as facts are things that I know aren't true --- but they're the experts and I'm 18. Maybe I need to think about this.

This is where WELS Campus Ministry fits in. **So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.** 4-5 years ago a young tree was planted – an autumn blaze maple. Just a few leaves, it was tied down and treated with care. When storms came through the caretaker would look out and just hope that it didn't get ripped out altogether. It was amazing to watch it grow. Last year in July there were several tornadoes in the area with 80-90 mile an hour winds. Trees were ripped up all over the place, but not that autumn blaze maple. It was bent – that may never straighten out – but it continues to grow stronger and stronger and stronger every month.

When students in our public universities and tech schools come to a Bible study during the week, or worship on a weekend, a special prayer of thanks is offered. There are SO MANY OTHER THINGS they could be doing. But, they remember the Word of God in Colossians 2 – by his grace they received Christ Jesus as Lord – they understand the importance of continuing to be rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as they were taught, wanting to live their lives in him!

And that doesn't even mention the significant others who are brought along and, wouldn't you know it, they want to take a new member class! Wouldn't you know it, "Hey Pastor, we'd like you to marry us." And, wouldn't you know it, they just bought a new house and are having a baby and want to transfer to St Someone Lutheran Church and start their lives together there. It's the students who bring a roommate or a friend who might be hurting and just need to get away from life for a while and they ask, "Why don't you come with me to campus ministry? We don't have much compared to a lot of groups on campus – but I guarantee you will find out just how much God loves you." Maybe that roommate never takes a class, or joins the church, but maybe in God's grand plan of eternal election that little campus ministry room, for an hour that night, was what he used to bring them Jesus as their Savior from sin.

Paul reminds the Colossians and us to continue to be overflowing with thankfulness. And I pray that you remember that too. Thankful for a Savior who has always been there for us even if our days on campus or during that age in our lives weren't stories that we necessarily would share with our church friends... and yet here we are today. Thankful for congregations that take the training of our youth well before college seriously – wanting them to know and understand the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, to build that root system! Thankful for parents who, when discussing with their sons and daughters where they will go to college, seriously take into consideration not just the city, and a major and the extracurriculars but also, "Will these next 4-5 years help bring you closer to Christ or further away from him?" Thankful for people like you who continue to support the work of Missions and Campus Ministry with your prayers and with your offerings.

And now, if I could – I would ask you to keep these young adults in your prayers. So many changes in their lives, so many new opportunities, some good, some bad. So much freedom. So many new pressures and responsibilities. Pray that they continue to be built up in Christ. Pray that their faith is strengthened in what they were taught. Pray for the future of our church body as the next generation holds on to the truths of God's Holy Word and many, many more come to see through the hollow and deceptive philosophies of the world and that these tender shoots keep rooted in Christ! Amen.