Put on Christ

Colossians 3:12-17 Kimby Young

 Isaiah 42:1-9 July 31, 2016

This summer we have been looking at different New Testament letters to early churches, to find some scriptural advice about living faithfully as a church today. This passage from Colossians is kind of a top ten list of “good advice for being a Christian.” It is one line after another about ways to live faithfully in a community of believers. Bear with one another; forgive each other; let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts; let the word of Christ dwell in you; be thankful. Each phrase alone is a sermon in itself. I invite you to reread these verses in the days ahead – maybe take one phrase a day – like the phrase “Bear with one another” - and let God speak to you thru that phrase. Apply it to First Presbyterian Church. Apply it to your home life. Apply it to work. “Bear with one another.” And listen for God’s new inspiration each day.

So let’s start with the first phrase from verse 12 in today’s scripture from Colossians. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved…” There are four important words in that phrase. Four words that describe each one of us here today. First you are God’s – you belong to God. God is your source and your resource. You come from God. You are connected to God. And God wants to be in relationship with you more than anything else. Second, you are chosen. Sometimes that word chosen gets a bad rap – when speaking about Presbyterians – but that’s not justified. To be chosen reminds us that God does not have to love us. God does not have to offer us new life. God does not have to relate to us at all. But God has chosen us. God chooses to be open to us and to build a relationship with us. God wants us. God wants you. So that does make you special. Not more special than anyone else – but special as you are – gifted, unique, individual and wonderful. You are chosen. You are chosen by God. The next word in the series is holy. You are holy. That sometimes sets some of us back. We don’t feel holy. We don’t feel good enough. But the scripture says you are holy. And it is not about your goodness. It’s not initially about you at all. You are holy because you are connected to God in Christ thru the Holy Spirit. It is that connection that makes us holy. To be holy means that we are set apart for God by God for God’s purpose. Sometimes we don’t feel we live up to that holiness, but nevertheless, because of the first two words – God’s chosen – because God has a plan for us and a purpose for us – that is what makes us holy. It is not about our goodness or our abilities. It is about God’s grace in us. That is what makes us holy, sacred, filled with the Spirit of God. And you are. You are holy. The last word in the phrase is beloved. God’s beloved. That really says it all. You are loved by God – absolutely, unconditionally – beloved children of God. God loves you as you are and God wants you to never forget that.

So that’s just the opening phrase of this passage, setting the tone for all the advice that follows. The rest of the passage tells us how to live as Christians – but this phrase reminds you who you are so that you can know how to live. Because if you know who you are, if you know to whom you belong, then you should know how to live. You are God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved. As such… what comes next?… As such… how do you live your life? Back to that list. Bear with one another; forgive each other; let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts; let the word of Christ dwell in you; be thankful. If you know who you are, if you know to whom you belong – then you know how to live.

A subtle point in this passage – one that we might miss with our modern perspectives – is that the writer is not talking to an individual or to us as individuals. The writer is talking to a community. Living the life of faith is not an individual activity. Living the life of faith is a communal activity. Community is essential to faithful living. Community is a priority for those who would be faithful. To be faithful to God, we must be with others. Notice all the descriptors – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, harmony – all of the qualities described in this passage are about loving interaction between people and among people. It’s not about being good alone. It’s about being good and faithful with others. It’s about helping others to be their best. These virtues help the community to be better and stronger and more of what God calls us to be. That is why we share our time and talent in the church – to make the church better, to help others to be their best.

Think about the word harmony. Scripture says love “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” In musical terms – harmony is when different notes or sounds are combined to make a pleasing sound. It’s about blending differences and uniqueness-es together. Harmony requires more than one voice. Harmony requires good communication. Harmony requires diversity. And perfect harmony requires that that diversity fits together in a pleasing and fulfilling way. You’ve all heard it – perfect harmony. You’ve all felt it. You’ve probably also heard harmony when it wasn’t quite right – when just one part was slightly out of place. It’s almost painful when you are not in harmony. That reminds us that every single person is important. Every single person contributes to the whole and we all need to sing our part. And we all need to support one another in offering our gifts. Harmony is not about the soloist – it’s about the whole community. Now, when you are in harmony – when every diverse piece participates and works together well, when all the parts are equally strong and equally right. Perfect harmony! The Bible says – that’s what love is like. It’s not one person shining over another. Nor is it every person in lock step uniform, being and doing the exact same thing. Love is when each part thrives on its own, filled with the Spirit, living the love of God. When all these inspired, gifted, powerful, grace filled, beloved and loving people of God come together to share all they have been given. When all these children of God give their best – whatever that is – and appreciate the gifts of others; When all of us in our diversity unite to live God’s love – that is perfect harmony. And that is glorious.

You can’t have harmony alone, (even though some of us might try.) We need others. We need a community to learn how to be faithful to God. That’s what a church is all about. You work together and interact together so that you know you are not alone. Your faith is not alone. It’s fine to have an individual spiritual connection with God. But it is even more rich when that connection with God also connects you to others and to service in the world. Your faith is not alone. The whole congregation is here for you. The whole faith tradition is here for you – 2000 years of Christian connection, 4000 years of understanding about God. You are not alone. You are loved and supported. That’s why we pray for one another. That’s why we gather together. We try to love one another as a community united by God. We may not be a perfect community – in fact, we decidedly are not perfect. We struggle, we disagree, we may even do stupid things. That’s why those phrases “Bear with one another; forgive each other; let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” – that’s why those phrases are in the scripture. We make mistakes in the church. But when we remember what pulls us together, we can return to the harmony God intends for us. When we remember that it is God who calls us together and God who calls us to be our best, then we grow as a faith community. I think that’s where we are now in this church. I have been here long enough to hear some stories – a lot of great stories, and a few stories about hurt feelings or bad behavior. So hear now those reminders from this scripture. Bear with one another; forgive each other; let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. What does that mean? Is there anyone you need to forgive? Is there anyone you need to ask for forgiveness? I don’t know – I’m just asking. If there is make the effort. If you need help, in making that effort toward reconciliation and forgiveness, come talk to me.

How do we remember what pulls us together? How do we remember that it is God who calls us to harmony and inspires us to peace? That answer is in the first verse. The New International version we read today says “Clothe yourself…” The older translations say “Put on” these Christ like qualities – even put on Christ. Think about that. When you get dressed in the morning you decide what to wear and you put those clothes on over your skin. It is the clothing that people see first. Blue robe. Red shirt. Whatever. So the verse says, “Put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience.” Put on Christ. Decide to put on love like you decide to put on pants. Make it a daily effort. Make it a conscious choice. Each morning, each time you decide to go out into the world, decide then that the world will see Christ on you and in you. Decide that love will be the first thing people will see when they see you – the love of God. Take it up. Put it on. And wear it every day everywhere you go. It’s such a great image, such a practical application, such a spiritual discipline that this passage from Colossians uses the phrase “clothe yourself” three times in various forms. Put on Christ. Wear Christ. Clothe yourself. And as you do, as you continue to make that conscious choice day by day, to put on Christ, eventually you won’t have to think about it, like you don’t have to think about wearing clothes. Eventually that presence of God will grow on you, and will be as natural as breathing in and breathing out. You will just get up and get moving with Christ all around you. Life in Christ becomes a habit. Loving others becomes a way of life. Offering peace and harmony becomes who you are, who we are as a community of believers. That is the promise of scripture, the invitation of this passage. Put on Christ. Let them see God in you. There’s a song like that by JJ Weeks band – “Let them see you in me.” As scripture says, “Whatever you do, in word and deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Let it be so for you and for all of us. Amen.