

The Chosen Ones
Colossians 3:1-17
November 29, 2020

By the time we get to the final month of any year I don't know about you, but I always feel a little weary looking back on the trials of the year that have been interwoven with blessings. (It should be noted that those trials are sometimes part of the blessings, however.) So Advent comes at the perfect time each year as we celebrate the fact that our Lord Jesus willingly gave up the glory and majesty of heaven to come to earth in the form of an infant to live among us in this fallen world. While we have never had to look hard to discover that this world is, indeed, in a fallen state, the year 2020 has brought this into such stunning clarity that one does not need to pay attention at all. I can feel the brokenness of this world in the pit of my stomach. We are entering an Advent season unlike any other that I have experienced in my lifetime. This year is marked by sickness, strife, discord, and seeming chaos everywhere you look. The saddest part is that this is not just happening in *the world*, but is happening within *the Church* as well.

The pandemic which has affected *everyone*, regardless of your thoughts on its true severity has worked to expose deeper political and social divisions which are making it difficult for even followers of Christ to overcome. This is especially true when you are part of a diverse church body like ours here at AVPC. I preached from 1 Corinthians a little over a year ago and pointed out the diversity that our church has, in spite of appearances. (Diversity is more than racial) We have members from all walks of life, those who can afford to retire at 40 years old and those who barely make ends meet. We have those who are just one more bad news story away from joining a militia and those who would describe their political beliefs as socialist. We have members who have lived in this area so long they have ancestors buried in the church cemetery and we have Yankees. (How about this: we even have a Canadian, an Irish national, a

Brazilian, and an Argentinian!) We have former Methodists, Baptists, and even Roman Catholics. In the midst of the current crises, when we are all shaken and fearful, how are we to respond individually? How are we supposed to move forward as a church when we have such a diversity of views? Our passage today is one that answers those questions in a powerful way. To be honest, I could really just read this passage and then sit back down because it is so beautiful, but we will spend a few minutes unpacking it. The Lord's answer to us through Paul is to remember who Jesus is and to remember who we are and who we are called to be as we follow Him.

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:1-17

The church at Colossae was being threatened with some form of heretical teaching. While we don't know the exact nature of the teaching, we do know that at its heart there was some element of claiming that Jesus was not enough for salvation. That there was some other ritual or mystic knowledge that was needed in order to be saved. Paul was quick to shut this down by reminding his readers first who Jesus was: "He is the image of the invisible god, the first-born of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth...all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:15-17) Paul then informs them of the reality of their life in Christ. After this theological teaching, as he always did in his letters, he moves into what this means, practically, for the conduct of those who follow Christ. This is what we have in our passage today. We are going to look at how life in Christ creates a new individual (The New You) and its implications for us as a body (The New We). We are not content to merely know theology, we are called to apply this to our lives as we display the hope of Jesus to a dying world and to brothers and sisters who follow Him.

First of all, we see that our new life begins and ends with Jesus. We are "raised with Christ," (1) sharing in the victory of His work on the cross. As He is currently seated at the right hand of God, a position showing that His work was accomplished and He has returned to His glorified state, we are called to set our minds on things above. We are assured that Jesus will return and when he does we will be revealed in a glorious state. The same Jesus who was, who is, and who is to come. We are reminded that "you have died, and your life is hidden in Christ with God." (3) This may bring to mind images in the Old Testament of being hidden in the shadow of the Lord, under His protection. However, I think Paul might be using this term in a different way. The Greeks had a term for when a dead body is buried, they would refer to the

person as being “hidden in the earth.” Physical death leads to our bodies being “hidden in the earth” where we decay and ultimately turn to dust. When we follow Jesus we die to our natural selves and our lives are, instead, “hidden in Christ.” That death leads to life. Instead of the darkness of the tomb we are hidden in the light of Christ. Instead of decay we experience growth. Instead of wasting away we experience renewal, ultimately to a glorious state. So the new you starts and ends with Jesus, passing from death to life. Make no mistake, however, God intends for this “new you” (and “new me”) to truly be new, in word and deed.

Paul calls on us to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,” (2) which could be misinterpreted to a call to not worry about the things that are going on right around us. However, he goes on to unpack this in a way that makes it clear that what happens in this life, the things we do and say, do make a difference. We are not called to simply float through life with our head in the clouds. The “things that are above” of which he speaks refer to Jesus, the author of our salvation who is sitting in a place of authority and power and the things which He desires for us, for our good. These are things that are heart-level things. Things which are counter to the deeply ingrained sinful desires that we are hesitant to give up. Paul is fighting against heretical teaching that tries to water down the gospel to mere knowledge. The heretical belief that there is some secret you need to know or some ritual you need to perform in order to gain salvation. Why are we as humans so easily swayed by such teaching? Have you ever struggled with leaning towards a performance-based view of what the Lord is wanting? I know I have. I think the reason is two-fold. First, it still keeps some of the control in my hands. In a sense I am still the master of my own destiny, which plays to the ultimate root of all human sin: that each of us wants to be our own god. Secondly, especially as Americans, I feel like if I just put my mind to it and try really hard I can do good things. However, what the Lord wants is

something so much more than blind obedience, He is after my heart. He wants relationship with me!

We need to first recognize who we are in Christ, before we get to what we should look like. Our actions are supposed to flow out of who we are, not the other way around, meaning we don't have to do something in order to achieve an identity. Again, it is not, "what" we know, but "who" we know that leads to this new life. Before we begin any talk about our calling to act I think it is important to remind us of one simple fact: God *loves* you. He doesn't just tolerate you. He doesn't begrudgingly relent from destroying you because Jesus vouches for you. Look at verse 12, you and I are called to action because we are "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." You may believe the part about being holy, which means "set apart for God," but do you believe the "beloved" part? You were chosen by God and in Christ Jesus you are both holy and beloved. God's love was not new information. Many people have criticized the Bible and Christianity for there being two different Gods portrayed in the Old and New Testament. People see an angry and avenging God in the Old Testament and a God of grace and mercy in the New Testament, but the reality is that God's plan for salvation always had to do with love. In Deuteronomy 7 God reminds the Israelites why He chose them, saying "it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord *set his love* on you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord *loves* you." (7-8)

It is in light of this that we see the calling on our conduct to be that of one who is "holy and beloved." Paul uses the illustration of putting off the old self and putting on the new self. As a matter of fact, we are first given a list of things to that should be "put to death." Verse 5 says to "put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." While our purpose today is not to go over this list

exhaustively, it is worth pointing out what these vices have in common. While it may seem odd to lump covetousness in with a list that otherwise has to do with sexual sins, it actually makes perfect sense. The one thing that all of these has in common is that these are deep-seated sinful desires that expose the fact that we are looking somewhere other than God for satisfaction and fulfillment. They are all focused on the self, with covetousness being the desire for more of, well, everything, whether it belongs to you or not. These are all-consuming desires that end up destroying us and destroying our relationship with the Lord as they chip away our hearts piece by piece.

We are also called to “put away” some things: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying. (8, 9) Again, the goal today is not to thoroughly examine each of these but there are a couple of things worth noting. Anger refers more to the flash of anger you get when challenged or wronged while wrath refers more to the smoldering kind of anger that burns for a long time. Also, obscene talk does not only refer to profanities, but also to abusive language. While the list of things we are called to put to death are things that interfere with our relationship with God, these traits that we are called to “put away,” like old clothing, interfere with our relationships with others. Instead, as God’s chosen ones (remember, that’s who you *really* are) we are called to look like Jesus. We are called to put on some traits, as if putting on new clothes: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other. (12-13) I don’t know about you, but so often I want to make lists like this conditional, as if to say, “well, yes, Lord, but isn’t there a time when I am called to stand up, to fight back in the name of truth?” We do have an example in scripture when one of the disciples physically stood up for Jesus with violence. In Matthew 26 we read that Peter cut off the ear of one of the soldiers sent to capture Jesus and instead of

saying “well-done, Peter! Wow, you really do love me,” Jesus says, “put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matthew 26:51-52) This *is not* a plea for pacifism, but it is about our heart and our reaction to others! We are told in verse 14, “above all these things put on love.” I hear that all over scripture and yet it is so hard to buy into. To be honest, to my intellect and to a hard heart this sounds, frankly, irresponsible. It sounds like either it actually is conditional or we are called to not worry about truth. Look at the next verse, verse 15, “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” This word *rule* has an athletic connotation to it, much like an umpire in a baseball game. There is truth, but we can be people peace and love when confronted with any opposition! Which leads us to our next point: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were *called in one body*.” (15) Each of us is called to be part of a “new we.”

Make no mistake, we are called to unity as followers of Christ, but this is not unity for the sake of showing off how enlightened we are. I have been reading *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and The Church* by Irwin L Ince, Jr. in which the author makes this very point. We actually have an example in scripture where humans were completely unified and it is a very negative example. The people at Babel were unified in their quest to build a tower to make a great name for themselves and the Lord saw such potential for evil for people so unified that He came down and confused their language. In our passage we see this scattering being undone as the Lord calls back those who are “chosen and beloved.” Just as the “new you” begins and ends with Jesus, the same goes for the “new we.” This new unified body is to be united around Jesus, where “Christ is all, and in all.” (11) This is the first, and most necessary characteristic of the community being built through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The second characteristic we see here is that earthly distinctions no longer matter. “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free.”

(11) Racial distinctions no longer matter. Church pedigree no longer matters. Country of origin no longer matters. Even the wildest people on the outside can be a part of this body! The Scythians were super barbarians in the eyes of Greeks, and Paul is saying they are welcomed in the name of Jesus. (Perhaps this would be people with face tattoos today?) It is worth saying that even politics does not matter. If you are like me, you read these things and you accept this as reality, but you wonder how this could be a practical reality. We may understand that Jesus unifies us, but how could we *really* be unified with so many cultural differences. Wouldn't it just be better if we shopped around for a church that looks and sounds more like us? On a recent trip on the Appalachian Trail I got in a conversation with a shuttle driver about diversity and inclusion in the outdoors, specifically on America's long-distance hiking trail. We both agreed that there is, at this point, not much ethnic diversity, but it is actually not a result of exclusion, because there is a great deal of inclusion of vastly different people on the trail. He made the point that you have millionaires striking up conversations with people who are basically homeless. People that in everyday society would be very hesitant to even approach each other interact very easily on the trail. Why?

The secret is in the destination. On the Appalachian Trail, for example, you have a group of people working towards a destination and every decision they make is aimed at making it to that goal. The people on the trail are still all of those things they were in society, it is just that those distinctions don't matter as much as the goal. For all of their differences they began to take on the look of someone with the same ultimate goal. Those differences are still there, but instead of being divisive, they add to the adventure. Where else can you have a couple of young

men blaring heavy metal with a small American flag flying from one of their backpacks pass you on an uphill only to catch up with them at lunch and find out they are Israeli nationals here on a visa to hike the Appalachian Trail?

My wife and I came to AVPC as visitors 16 years ago. We have been members here for 12 years. If you do the math you will figure out that means we were visitors for four years! You see, neither of us are joiners. If I am honest with myself, we were on the verge of making the choice that so many from our generation (and subsequent generations) made to leave the Church as we questioned how essential it is to being a follower of Christ. We weren't on the verge of renouncing our faith, just the church. Something happened when we go here, though. Of course we were blown away by the teaching, but there was something different about *the people*. The more we got to know people here, the more confounded, intrigued, and inspired we were. We saw obviously wealthy people rubbing elbows with people who were obviously not. We met sons of Confederate veterans and we met Yankees. We met former Baptists, Methodists, agnostics, Roman Catholics. We met political conservatives and we met people with liberal political views. We saw a people who received convicting words in sermons with humble and contrite hearts, and were not afraid or ashamed to get up during sharing and prayer times and lay bare what the Lord was doing in their heart. We saw a people who celebrated together and who lamented and mourned together. We experienced a people who welcomed a couple of outsiders and made them feel like insiders. We experienced a people who supported us in God's calling to Fairfield even when our own families did not.

We experienced the tangible love of Jesus Christ here at AVPC in the midst of a community unified in Him. As we are caught in the current age of division in society, I see signs of it here in our congregation and I am reminded of my need for Jesus for myself, in my

response, and for our need for Jesus. Our hope for rejuvenation is found in the last characteristic of this “new we,” thankfulness. We are to be a thankful people and this thankfulness is not something we manufacture. This thankfulness is rooted in Christ’s goodness to us in the blessing of community. The final three verses begin with a focus on Jesus and end with us being thankful. “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. *And be thankful.* Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *with thankfulness in your hearts to God.* And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks to God the Father through him.* (15-17) We have done the things mentioned in verse 16 today and we do them every Sunday. How often do you allow the “word of Christ to dwell in you richly, though?” Take heart, this “new you” and the “new we” are something that we cannot manufacture for ourselves. Verse 10 says that the new self “is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” The renewal you see, comes from outside of this new self, and it is ongoing. We are moving towards future glorification at the return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

The word for “thankful” in verse 15 is the word from which we get *eucharist*. So, as we celebrate Communion, this is a thanksgiving meal for people who are chosen and beloved by the Lord. It is a thanksgiving meal for people who have exchanged an identity found in any social or racial distinction, for an identity dominated by their destination. It is a thanksgiving meal for people who are in the process of being renewed in the Holy Spirit instead of rotting in sin. It is a thanksgiving meal for those who long to put to death their own selfishness and anger and who choose to put on the garment of love. It is a thanksgiving meal for people who are thankful for a savior who came in humility not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be

saved through him. (John 3:17) It is a thanksgiving meal for those, like me, who are thankful that Jesus didn't allow them to stay a loner. I am thankful to be called into community in Jesus. I am thankful to be called into this community. I am thankful for each of you.