

Practicing Resurrection

Colossians 3:1-17

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it... Practice resurrection.

--Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"

Our reading this morning from Paul's Letter to the Colossians began with these words: *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* When Paul writes "if" you have been raised with Christ, he is not questioning whether or not this has happened. What has happened to us because of and in Christ is not in doubt. The word he uses has the meaning of "since"—since you have been raised with Christ. When we receive the living Christ as savior and lord of our lives, and when we are baptized, we share God's power of resurrection, of new life, that raised Jesus from death.

So first Paul wants to say that our new life in Christ is God's gift of life. It is grace, something God has done for us. Everything that comes between us and God, between us and each other, between us and life itself is overcome and broken through by God's power of new life. We see it in Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' faithfulness to God's purposes, to God's love and compassion, led him into conflict with the pretentious powers of religion and politics of his day. His crucifixion seemed to be the sad end of a noble but ineffectual life. But the mystery of the resurrection is the raising up and affirmation of that life of faithfulness, servanthood, compassion, and the non-violent witness to life.

This life is our true humanity. As Paul says later on in our passage, this is the image of God being renewed in us. This new, true life is not something we achieve or have to earn. It is something we simply receive from God. And it is the whole foundation of our lives from now on. The life of faith is not about striving for something we don't have. It is a living out of something God has given to us. It is not about making ourselves good. It is about letting God's gift of new life grow into fullness.

Many years ago I was on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton's monastery near Bardstown, Kentucky. I had not been long into my first pastorate out of seminary. We now had two children. I was feeling the strains and stresses of both work and being a new father. I arrived at the Abbey feeling anything but new. I was exhausted physically, mentally, and spiritually. The second day of the retreat I was rested enough to take a walk through the

fields and woods of the monastery. I was beginning to feel a hint of renewal, but had a ways to go. As I walked, I suddenly came upon a field of jonquils, those harbingers of spring. I stood in the midst of that carpet of yellow and green with the warmth of the early spring sun enveloping the field and me. It took me out of myself for that moment, beyond the rather miserable preoccupations of my spirit. It was a moment of grace.

I returned to the Abbey in time for the afternoon office. During the service, one of the brothers quietly walked to the lectern to read the scripture passage. It was from another of Paul's letters, his Second Letter to the Corinthians. The monk's simple and unaffected voice spoke the words perfectly so that I heard them as though for the first time, though I had read and studied them many times: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* Those words struck my soul like thunder. I felt anything but a new creation—wary, inadequate, overwhelmed by life. Yet the message was clear: I am in Christ and therefore I am a new creation whether I feel like it or not. It has nothing to do with how I feel, how I assess my own life, my strengths or weaknesses, my achievements or failures, my adequacies or inadequacies. It has nothing to do with me and everything to do with God and what God has done for me in Christ. The life I so longed for and felt estranged from was already there as a gift only to be touched and received. That was an experience of what Paul is talking about--*Since we have been raised with Christ...*

The second thing Paul wants to talk about is what we do with this gift of new life. We are to make something of it. Let's call it "practicing resurrection," a phrase I borrow from a poem by Wendell Berry. In his poem called "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," Berry talks about living in surprising ways, ways that "don't compute" with what goes for sanity in today's world—militarism, greed, and being out of touch with the creation of which we are integrally a part. "Practicing resurrection" is living as those who have a deeper understanding and humility about life, who live in grace-filled ways, ways that are life giving and not destructively centered on power and self-centered desires.

That's what Paul is talking about. This new life that has been given us by God in Christ, our true humanity, is to be lived out by us each day. There is spiritual work for us to do. Paul says there are two directions our spiritual work needs to take. The first we might call the negative working of "putting to death" whatever in us is not part of our new life in Christ. Paul lists some of the things we are to "put to death": fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive talking. We don't have to talk about each of these things and what Paul meant by them. All we have to do is reflect on what in us doesn't fit with the new life we have in Christ. I think we each are aware of what those things are, the attitudes and mental habits that make us contribute to disharmony, divisiveness, and hostility. What Paul is saying, if I may put it in my own terms, is that we are to become honestly and humbly aware of how we add to the unloving, unforgiving, hostile, and self-centered patterns of life that exist in the human family, beginning with our own community of faith. Paul's language is strong. We are to put these things to death in ourselves. These are the things that must die with the old life. This is sharing in Christ's death.

Rather than “putting to death,” I would say we need to let these things die, wither away, through increased self-understanding and self-awareness. This is part of our inward journey work. What are the things in our own attitudes, mental practices, and ways of relating to others that do not fit the new person we are in Christ? We don’t like to acknowledge them or face them. But when through the practice of inner awareness we identify in an honest way these things in ourselves, we have already taken the first step toward letting them die. And over time, as our understanding deepens, along with our confidence in God’s love for us, we find ways to stop feeding our anger or insecurity or fear, whatever it is that gives rise to those things that are destructive toward ourselves and others.

It is important that we do this work of “putting to death” in community with others who are also working with the same things. Being in community will sooner or later bring to light the things we need to let die. It is also our life in community that supports us as we do the work of letting them die. I think this has to do with what we call accountability. If we have made the commitment to live this new life through giving ourselves to a disciplined life of faith, then we need others to help us become aware of what in us is not of this new life. For this reason, we need to get beyond the pride that keeps us from receiving criticism, advice, or correction from others. But the other side of accountability is the support and encouragement we give one another to keep at it and not sink into despair about ourselves or into useless self-judgment. The goal is living out as fully as we can the new life we already have in Christ.

The negative work is not enough, however. There is positive work to be done. Paul calls this “putting on.” He uses the image of putting on new clothes. When we receive Christ and are baptized, it is like putting on new clothes. In my “Pastor’s Classes” with children and young people who are going to be baptized I often use this passage from Colossians. We talk about the new clothes we are to put on when we are baptized, the new kind of life. I usually tell about very early Christian baptism. In some places in the earliest centuries, the little communities would gather before dawn on Easter morning for the baptism of the “catechumens,” those who had been preparing for baptism for three years or so. The catechumen would be brought into the room where there was a large hollowed-out stone filled with water. The candidate—male or female—would take off all clothing and enter the water naked. At this point the children’s eyes become very wide! I quickly put their fears to rest—that’s not the way we do it today! When the newly baptized Christian emerged from the water, someone would bring new clothes to place on the person. Their nakedness symbolized our complete need of God, our dependence upon God’s unconditional love and grace. The new clothes symbolized the new life we receive and put on.

So, says Paul, here are some clothes to be put on: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with each other, forgiving each other. And above everything else, love, the very kind of love with which God loves us. A tall order! There is no doubt that these clothes are too big for us. We all know how far we have to go in being the compassionate, kind, patient, forgiving, loving people we are called to be. But this knowledge should not make us feel hopeless. We can do it. We can grow into that new life that is

already ours because of God’s grace. It isn’t an easy or quick journey. It will take us a lifetime.

Here, too, we can take comfort because we are part of a community that is intentionally working with the new life we have in Christ so that it becomes manifest more fully in us. Only in community can we find the encouragement we need and hear the words that call us continually to the putting on these new clothes. Even though they are too big for us, we can grow into them. .

This Easter we know enough of a kind of Christianity in our nation and world that speaks the name of Christ but does not embody his spirit, the attitudes and actions that Paul says we are to put on. A Christianity of war and not peace. A Christianity of power and not humility. A Christianity of arrogance and not meekness. A Christianity of retaliation and not forgiveness. A Christianity of self-concern and not the love that is of God, the love that acts on behalf of others in their need. A Christianity, in short, without Christ. What is needed more than ever are communities of Christ that are embodying the resurrection life. Today let us renew our joy because of the new life we already have in Christ. It is God’s great gift. Then let us also renew our desire and efforts to put off what is old and put on the new, a community that is practicing resurrection.