

Room to Grow

Colossians 3:12-17 *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

These words from the Letter to the Colossians are some of the richest Paul ever wrote. We could take these few verses as the focus of a lifetime of contemplation and reflection. There is far too much here to deal with in one sermon. So I would simply like to open it up a bit and perhaps you might take it from there and find for yourself the spiritual richness of this passage.

Paul begins: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...." We may shrink from this notion of being God's "chosen ones." It sounds too self-important and religiously arrogant. I remember a Jewish scholar saying in response to the matter of Jews being God's chosen people—"You think it is easy being God's chosen people? Sometimes we wish God had chosen someone else!" Being God's chosen ones is a matter of God's grace, God's love toward us, not some special quality about us that makes us better or superior. More than that, it is really about God's call to us in Christ, the call to a certain kind of life, and our response to that call. I think Paul is saying something like this: God's love for the whole world in Christ is what you have responded to, what you have said "yes" to with your lives. This love has called you into being as a community. It is not your doing, not something you chose for yourselves. It is God's gracious presence and call in your lives. You are holy and beloved because you have responded, because you in turn have chosen this life. Of course all people are God's beloved and cherished children. But you have become holy and particularly loved because you have chosen this way of life.

Paul speaks of this new life as putting on a set of clothes. It is a favorite image Paul uses to talk about what happens when we receive Christ as the spiritual center of our lives, when we respond to Christ's call to follow him. Paul speaks of baptism as "putting on Christ." When we put on Christ, we are putting on our true nature. Yet it is a nature that we have gotten away from and lost touch with. Putting on Christ, however, is not something we do once and for all. It has the sense of continuing to put on Christ. It becomes the pattern of our lives.

I often used this text with children and young people who were preparing for their baptisms. We would make cutout dresses, shirts, pants, shoes, belts, and put each of Paul's words on them—compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love. As we did this, we would talk together about what we thought each of the words meant. I did not want to try and define for them once and for all what these words meant, but simply to make them aware of these dimensions of life in Christ for future exploring, learning, and growing.

When the day came for the baptism service, I would always notice how the white robes supplied by the church sometimes swallowed up the smaller kids. They did not mind in the least these ill-fitting robes. They put them on with great excitement and seriousness about what they were doing. Sometimes a parent or other adult would question whether a particular child might be too young "to understand" what she or he was doing. I responded in two ways. First, it is not a matter of "understanding" everything. Who of us understands the fullness of what it means to make a commitment to follow Jesus? Many adults show very little understanding of what it really means to follow Jesus, though they have been in the church many years and know a great deal about the Bible and religion. Second, children DO have a deep understanding of spiritual matters. They may not express it the way adults do, but they grasp it at a profound level and with wide-eyed eagerness that can inspire us. What we adults often mean by

“understanding” is closing our minds down around certain ideas or answers. Children know that following Jesus is a matter of wonder and openness.

The robes were too big. These words are too big. The whole thing is too big for us. When we put on Christ, we take on a way of life that is continually unfolding and calls us to ongoing spiritual growth. Who can claim to be compassionate? Who can claim to be completely kind? Who can claim to be forgiving or loving or humble? Who can claim to be patient, bearing with those who are difficult or lack maturity? These words point to spiritual attributes that are very big. We have to grow into them. I think Paul is saying that this life we “put on” in Christ both fits us to a tee AND is so big for us that we will always be growing into it for the rest of our lives. It fits us because it corresponds to our true nature as children of God. It is the way God made and means us to live. Yet there is always room to grow because our understanding is always deepening and changing and growing. And so is our living out of the life Jesus calls us to.

Take forgiveness, for instance. We may start with the idea that forgiveness means “forgive and forget.” Or getting to the point where you feel better about someone who has offended or hurt you. But what if forgiveness is not the same thing in every situation? I met with a woman for several months as she struggled with the effects of her father’s abuse when she was young. For decades she had let this painful reality determine her life as an adult. But finally she wanted to find a way to get beyond it. She told me that she felt as though she needed to forgive her father. She could not forget the abuse by one she had trusted. And she could not envision ever having a relationship with him. Yet she wanted to pry loose the hold of this thing on her own life. She had to start living more fully. As she worked with this, forgiveness came to mean finding ways of letting go, of getting herself free of the fears, anger, and distrust that the abuse had implanted in her. In time she was able to forgive in that sense, as she became determined to live her life more fully. As she became freer, stronger, and healthier within herself, her hatred of and anger toward her father began to lessen.

Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiveness, love. These are all very big words that we will always understand in new and deeper ways. The point is to keep putting them on, to keep growing into this life we have in Christ.

Paul says something in this passage that caught my attention in a new way this time. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.” What is life-giving to our community is nothing other than the word of Christ, or the word about Christ. Staying in touch with that word, remembering that our purpose for being together is Christ and the life he calls us into—this is what shapes us and gives us life. Paul connects to that “teaching and admonishing one another.” Growth in the life that Christ brings only happens if we are teachable, if we are willing to remind one another and be reminded of who we are called to be.

In our community, we call this **accountability**. It is an important word, though a bit harsh sounding. It points to what Paul is talking about. It is about remembering who we are and are called to be, and finding ways of helping each other remember and stay on track, as it were. Accountability, or admonishing, as Paul puts it, is a very positive thing. It is not about running around checking on each other or keeping a scorecard on each other or ourselves. It is about becoming the people we are really made to be. Holding each other accountable assumes that each of us is fully capable of growing in this life Jesus has called us to. And yet, accountability recognizes that there are times when we act in ways that are contrary to that life. As God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, we sometimes act badly! When that happens, it is not helpful when the hurt or difficulty we cause by our actions is ignored or simply put up with by the community. When we make a commitment to be part of the community of Christ, we are including in our commitment a willingness to be held accountable, an acknowledgement that we will always have more to learn and to grow. There are times when we will need to be reminded of our commitments, of the clothes we have put on in Christ.

Holding each other accountable, or admonishing each other, as Paul puts it, needs to be done with all the wisdom we can muster. It is a wisdom that comes from love, the love God has for each of us. It means seeing each other through the eyes of that loving wisdom. Therefore, accountability is always done in a spirit of kindness and respect. At the same time, it is also challenging, calling us to be who God made us to be and to work seriously with the commitments we have made. The aim is not to create an atmosphere of legalism or anxiousness, but of growth in the new life God has given us in Christ.

The life of following Christ as persons and as a community is not something static, something at which we “arrive.” It means constantly growing and learning, deepening our understanding and gaining wisdom. This is the first Sunday after Christmas, the church’s continuation of the season of Christmas. As far as our culture goes, Christmas has come and gone. Now it is time for after-Christmas sales and getting back to business as usual, the ways of living that continue to foster greed and violence and the exploiting of people. But for us as Christians, Christmas can be far more than a religious holiday that we simply get through or get over and done with. It is a reminder that the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is to be an ongoing reality in our lives, the center out of which we are to live our lives, unfolding in continued spiritual growth. Paul reminds us that as followers of Jesus and as his community, we have put on clothes that are too big for us, though they suit us to a tee. There is always room to grow.