

February 16, 2020

Colossians 3:12-17

Sometimes I look at a given scripture passage and wonder what I should say about it. Then there are the scripture passages that say it all and I wonder why I should muddy the waters by speaking about them. Today's lesson, which is the passage that inspired the writer of the children's anthem, is one of those that needs little commentary on my part. If you carefully read Paul's words, you have all you need to know. It is a self-contained sermon in itself. But fear not, I am going to expand upon it.

The Apostle Paul was amazing at marketing; helping us understand, verbally and visually, some difficult concepts. My favorite is his describing the church and its members as a body, with each body part, each member of the body, being separate and distinct, yet a part of a whole; a part of the one.

Here in Colossians, and also in Ephesians (although slightly different), Paul expands on the body image by telling us, each one of us a member of the body, how to clothe ourselves. In this instance he is not talking about shirts and sweaters, rather comportment and attitude: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Wearing these clothes brings with them a call to tolerance and support of others, even to the point of forgiving others Paul says.

Along with clothing, Paul wrote to the Ephesians encouraging them to put on God's armor, such as the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes to

move us speedily toward peace, and the shield of faith. These are the kind of things that will protect us, physically and spiritually, as we live out our faith.

In his Colossians' list Paul saves the most important piece of clothing for last: love. This, he says, is above all else. Love is the most important piece of clothing or armament in our closet or arsenal, and it can be very difficult to put on.

Why? Just think about the person you dislike the most; the politician you dislike the most. Think about the person who just turns your stomach. Got that person in your head; feel it in your gut? Now think about wishing nothing but good for that person; nothing but success. Think about loving them.

Paul says, putting on love is the finest clothing we can wear. Putting on love is the strongest protective armor we can have. I say, putting on love is one of the hardest things for people to do, even for followers of Jesus. Sometimes it can feel almost counter-intuitive. Why should we love that horrible person? How can we possibly love someone who is that awful? Remember, Jesus never told us that we have to like everyone. He said we are to love everyone.

Paul offers us some help in figuring out how to "clothe ourselves with love." He begins with: "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." When you encounter someone you dislike or when you think about them and your gut kicks in with an "Ugh!", stop yourself, think of the

peace of Christ, focus your mind on God, and remember your connection to the Oneness, which calls you into the one body.

This prepares you for the next verse, the next step: “be thankful.” Thankful to God? to the world? to the person we dislike? Yes. Yes. Yes. Gratitude is key. We can never really know how God will use even the person we dislike. Gratitude is one way of putting God first, rather than our own feelings. Gratitude can only come, when we see what we have been given is unearned.

When peace and gratitude are in place, we are ready to let “the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly.” Paul is not talking about literal speech here, certain words or texts. He is pointing to Jesus’ deeds, the word made flesh. We are to try to live into what Jesus would have us do. What Jesus did, and would do, is what Paul wrote about at the beginning of the passage. Jesus put on “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” It was a bearing with one another as well as a forgiving of one another, Paul wrote.

Forgiveness does not mean we accept or ignore the actions of someone we disagree with or who is doing harmful things. Paul encourages us to “teach and admonish one another”, but to do so with and in wisdom; to do so with and in love. All of this gets summed up, reaches its high point in the concluding verse of this passage: “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God our Parent through him.”

Remember that old adage: Look before you leap. Well, think before you speak or act. Think about how your words or actions might reflect on Jesus. Is what you are about to say or do representative of the teachings of Jesus? Will it bring honor and thanks to God?

Ah, you might think to yourself, but they said or they did something just as bad or worse. I have to respond in kind. How juvenile, how elementary-school-playground this kind of thinking is. As I have already said, putting on love is not easy; it is not for sissies.

In these highly divisive times, when you find your blood pressure rising, because of that awful person across the street or in some public office, stop, remember how we open worship – “God is present”, and let the peace that refocus brings you lead you to clothe yourself in love. Not because the person deserves it; not because you are the better person, the bigger person; but because the only way we will ever know, in our own lives and in the world, the peace of God that passes all understanding is when we are willing to clothe ourselves in love, because it is how we honor Jesus the Christ and give thanks to God, the Holy One.

May God give us the wisdom and the courage we need to clothe ourselves in love. Amen.