

“THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS: III – AS GOD’S CHOSEN ONES”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

April 24, 2016

Colossians 3:12-17

When’s the last time you got a gift, and how did you respond? I think it’s always fun to watch people open gifts. I was at a baby shower not long ago, and they know the baby is going to be a girl, so a lot of the gifts were frilly dresses and adorable socks and shoes, and of course, the reaction every time the mom-to-be opened one of those gifts was “Ahhh” and “ohh, how adorable!” It’s fun to watch that kind of gift opening.

But it’s somehow fascinating to watch someone open a gift that’s not so cute and adorable – maybe a gift that really doesn’t turn them on, but in the spirit of graciousness they have to respond positively – so they’ll say something like, “Oh, look at that!” or “You shouldn’t have!” – hoping the giver doesn’t realize how true that statement is!

Seriously, though, it is a blessing to receive gifts. We’ve all received more than our share of gifts, and, more than that, we have all received the greatest gift ever – and that is the gift of Jesus Christ. That’s the gift the Apostle Paul talks

about throughout his writings, and especially in this letter to the Colossians, that we've been considering these past three weeks.

The whole background of Colossians is that that young church at Colossae came together because of the gift they had all received into their lives – Jesus Christ. That's what drew them together, and now Paul is helping them figure out how to respond to that great gift and blessing.

In the first chapter, you'll remember, he admonished them to stay focused – to stay focused on Christ, and not to get misled by others' heretical thinking and practices.

Last week, he spoke to them about staying strong in their new found faith in Christ and in the church, to keep their heads up and have courage, in the face of those who would be critical of them.

This week, Paul gets personal. He talks to the Colossians about how they are to respond personally to this great gift from God – this gift of a Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Paul says to them that having accepted Jesus as the Lord of life changes you. You're not the same person you were before. You see life differently. Your heart has been changed, and so should your lifestyle. People should be able to tell by looking at you, and listening to you, that faith in Jesus is the heart of your life.

But Paul says, "It's not easy. It doesn't happen automatically. This change in your life has to be intentional. You have to be all in."

You know, I think Paul wrote like that because he saw, too many times, what I would call "conditional Christianity." It's the "sure, I love Christ and I have accepted him as my Lord and Savior, but . . ."

It's like the man who wrote a love letter to his girlfriend that went like this:

"My darling, I love you. My love for you is like a red, red rose that blooms for you alone. It is like the nectar of the heavens. It is my soul's delight. My love for you is so great that I would travel to the ends of the earth for you. I would dare the greatest dangers. I would fight my way to your side though giants should oppose me. Through storm and flood and fire, I would persevere to reach you. Accept this letter as the expression of my undying love. Yours forever, John.

P.S. I'll be over to see you Saturday night – if it doesn't rain." (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It*, "Celebrating God's Beautiful Mind," p. 22)

You see? "Conditional" love. Not unlike "conditional Christianity." I love you, Jesus. I love you like no other, and I'll put you first Jesus, unless . . .

I'm hanging around with the gang and don't want to stick out like some goody two-shoes.

Or, unless I have to stop focusing on myself.

Or, unless it's too hard and requires sacrifice.

It's like the man in today's Gospel lesson, who, though he'd had his debt forgiven, would not forgive the one who owed him money. I love you Jesus, and I want to be like you, unless . . .

Paul knows the life of faith can be demanding, yet he invites the Colossians to live that way – to show the world by the things they say, the things they do, the way they act, the love they share – that they are new people because of Jesus.

And he does it, by telling them first the things they need to take off – to shed; and then the things they need to take on.

First – what they need to take off, to take out of their lives. He says “Put to death whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. Get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language. Do not lie, and treat everyone – circumcised and uncircumcised, slave or free – treat them as the children of God that they are.”

Paul says, in no uncertain terms, that those things are not the way of Christ. You can't be a Christian and be greedy, or have out of control anger, or speak ill of others, or speak ill to others. You can't lie, or treat people as unworthy. None of that speaks to a life changed by the love of Jesus Christ. It just doesn't.

I talked recently to a person who told me about a rather terrifying experience he had. He was driving down the road nice as you please, when all of a sudden a

driver comes flying up behind him, and then starts tailgating him. It was a woman driver, and she honked the horn, and flashed her highbeams to try to get him to go faster. He could see in his rear view mirror that she was screaming things at him and then she began to make some not-so-nice hand gestures, or more accurately, finger gestures to him. It was ugly and not a little bit scary. When they finally got to a place where the road expanded to four lanes, she swerved around him and went flying by – of course, shooting daggers at him the whole time. All of that was bad, but as if that weren't bad enough, after she got by him, the man noticed two bumper stickers on her car. One was "Honk If You Love Jesus" and the other "Follow Me to My Church."

What?! It doesn't compute. Paul would say, "You can't live like that and profess to have had your life changed by the love of Jesus Christ."

So, what does Paul do next? Well, he does what we've seen him do in both of the previous chapters, in both of the previous two weeks we've been looking at Colossians – he turns to the positive. He always tries to encourage these new Christians in positive ways – ways they can see as attainable and possible.

So now, after telling them what they need to give up, he tells them what they need to take on – the good things they need to embrace. Things like compassion,

kindness, lowliness, meekness, humility, forbearance, forgiveness, praise and worship. He says if you live with these qualities, people will automatically see that something is different about you, they will know that Christ has touched and changed your life.

And isn't that true? Don't you notice people that are like that, people that are good and kind, people that have compassion, people that are humble and meek, people who easily forgive? You don't forget those kind of people, because they stick out in these days of increasingly "me-centered" living. You know that there's something more to them, something deeper in them, they have been touched by a love that changed them – the love of Christ.

You know, someone I read recently asked some intriguing questions that went like this: "Who won the Super Bowl last year? Most people probably don't remember (he said). Who won the Oscar for best actress last year? Most people probably don't remember. Who won the Heisman Trophy last year? Do you remember the current Miss America's name? Can you name two people who have won a Nobel Prize? How did you do (he continues)? Except for the trivia experts, none of us remembers the headliners of yesterday very well. How soon we forget! And what we've looked at here are no second-rate achievements. These are the best in their fields. But the applause dies down. The awards tarnish. The

achievements are forgotten. The accolades and certifications are buried with their owners.

But here's another quiz (he continues). Can you remember three or four people who have believed in you, encouraged you, and stood by you in tough times? I'm sure that you did better on this second quiz, and my hunch (he concludes) is that all of those people you thought of had one thing in common – they loved you unconditionally! And (he says) the point is clear: The people who really make a difference are not those with the credentials, but those with the love, those who put love first.” (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It*, “Celebrating God’s Unconditional Love,” p. 52.)

That guy gets what Paul was telling the Colossians – it’s about love and patience and compassion and understanding – that’s a life in Christ – that’s a life that reflects the change Christ brings. That’s a life that will draw others to Christ as well.

Most of you know that I spent this past week on a bus trip to Nashville with 35 members of the Classic Christians. We had a wonderful week together, and in some ways, I got to see Paul’s lesson here in Colossians lived out. I saw it lived out – the compassion, kindness, forbearance, patience – I saw it lived out among the



members of the group that traveled. I watched as they laughed together, prayed together, sang together, took care of one another, and reflected God's love to one another and others whose lives touched theirs throughout the week – the bus driver, guides, hotel and restaurant personnel, and many others. They made friends with strangers, helped a hungry man, shared pizza with hotel personnel – well, the list could go on and on. Like I said, Paul's words to the Colossians on how people whose lives have been changed by Jesus Christ should act, were, in my eyes, lived out on the trip this week.

And there was one other thing. On Tuesday night, we went to the Grand Ole Opry and saw six different performers or performing groups. One of them was a young man named Chris Janson. I know some of you know who he is, but I have never heard of him. I hadn't even heard of his most famous hit – "Buy Me a Boat." What I will always remember about him forever, though, is this – when he was talking on stage in front of thousands of people there and to millions over the airwaves because the performance was being broadcast live, and he was talking about the most important things in his life – one of them was his love for Jesus Christ. In the world of show business that can be so self-centered, and so obsessed with people like the Kardashians, this young man stood up and said so beautifully, "My life has been changed by Jesus Christ. He is so important to me." Somewhere in heaven, the Apostle Paul is smiling!

Friends, I know that Paul knew what a tall order he was placing in front of the Colossians, and in front of you and me. It is a lofty list of qualities with which we're called to live, and looking at it, you and I have to wonder if we can we do it, or how we're doing at living that way?

Well, you know, Paul ends this passage today with some help for us. He basically shows us how to equip ourselves to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. He says "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" – in other words, immerse yourself in the Bible for guidance and inspiration. Then he says "teach and admonish one other" – study together with other people of faith, encourage each other, challenge each other. Then build up your spirit through worship – singing songs, hymns and spiritual songs, praise God with other believers. Finally, above all, Paul says, be thankful. Give God thanks for all of the gifts He has given you, for when you are thankful, you can't help but want to give to others.

So, as we come to an end of this study of Colossians, how are you feeling? How do you think you're doing as a follower of Jesus Christ? Do you think that when people watch you or listen to you they know somehow that you are a person of faith, a person whose life has been changed by the love of Christ? I hope you do, but if not, you know, with Jesus, it's never too late. It's never too late to live a life worthy of the love he has showered upon you. You can start today – start putting

on those things Paul talks about, and start doing those things that will strengthen you on your discipleship journey.

Oh friends, you and I know how much the world needs to see love, needs to know the love of Christ. May we be ones who show them, by our very lives, what a friend they have in Jesus, how Jesus brings life, abundant life, real life, fruitful life, eternal life. So may we be guided and indeed, inspired by these words of Paul, to show the world how our lives have been touched and changed by the greatest gift ever given – Jesus, the Light of the World. May it be so.

Amen.