

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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October 28, 2018
Learning & Living God's Love, Together
Colossians 3:12-17

, Together

It has been a tough week for Americans who pay attention to the news. If you were hoping for an alternative message to the violence in our national news, or even just to the election ads we've been bombarded with in recent weeks, I think you may have just heard it in our scripture. Later in the service we will offer prayers in response to the violence. I will speak now to the campaign rhetoric. I think the two are related.

With regard to the campaign, I can't imagine anyone who's been enjoying this season. It's been harsh, mean, prideful, ruthless, and out of control.

A list that's exactly opposite of the Christian virtues extolled by Paul in the first verse of today's scripture. They are: Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Meekness, or gentleness. And patience.

The Christian message is counter-cultural! The culture is telling us that fear is a great motivator, that hatred is universal, that violence can only be countered with more violence, that lying is okay because people will believe what they want to believe, and that greed is admirable because everybody wants to be rich.

I am here today to tell you that those values are the antithesis of Christian values. I'm here today to speak the alternative message which the Bible speaks so clearly, that Love is the greatest value, the highest virtue, and the strongest power there is.

So you can turn off the TV ads, quickly recycle all those mean-spirited mailers, ignore all the pop-up ads which clutter the internet, stay away from social media's rudeness—and listen to the word of Christ. You've come to the right place, Christ's church, where there is strength in numbers. For we are determined to live this counter-cultural way TOGETHER.

This fall we're exploring the theme of "Learning and Living God's Love," the heart of our calling as a community of faith in Jesus Christ in 21st century America. But when the session developed this theme, we didn't want to leave it at that. Someone might get the impression that a group of individuals come to this church to learn and live God's love, take what they need, and leave as a group of individuals. That's not our goal. Our goal is to do this TOGETHER. We as a session briefly debated the comma in the phrase, and decided that togetherness was important enough that it needs to stand apart to be noticed. So the theme is fully stated, "Learning and Living God's Love, Together." Today's scripture helps us understand our togetherness as we love God.

Notice that all the virtues in this scripture are relational. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. These dwell in individuals, they grow in individuals, they are exercised by individuals, but what they describe is how we relate to others. They are habits of being which we cultivate so that we can actually do what the second verse of today's scripture advises: bearing with one another and forgiving one another. And, just as Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, the greatest of these Christian virtues is Love. Love encompasses and encourages forgiveness, love nourishes and grows forbearance, love teaches and models compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. As *The Message* puts it, Love is "your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it." (Col 3:14)

I have a friend who is a pastor in Connecticut. She writes a blog that I often resonate with. This week, she proposed a solution to the world's disquieting news. She says,

In this day and age of declining church attendance, waning interest in organized religion, and disdain for the damage done by too many church leaders, the church still has Good News of hope, forgiveness, and new life. The world does not get the final word on what is true—God does. (Sue Foster, fosteringyourfaith.com, 10/26/2018)

And this word, this treasure, is carried in the fallible vessel of the church, made up of the fallible people of the church. We may feel inadequate to this task, because we know we don't always wear the all-purpose garment of Love. But we're followers of Jesus, so we're trying to be Christians. Poet Maya Angelou once remarked,

I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business. It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity.' The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.'

(<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/life-faith-takes-practice>)

So in full acknowledgment that these virtues are difficult to achieve, that none of us will ever arrive at perfection, and that living love is our goal, not something we check off on our "to-do" list, we come together to learn love in this school of love called church.

Christian communities have been working on this since the first century. It's right there in the letters to the Colossians, the Corinthians, the Ephesians, the Thessalonians—you get the idea. This is our job, to learn and live love, together. Over the last month, we've heard members of our session talk about and write about what they love about our church and why they are committed to it--the "together" part which motivates commitment of time, talents and treasures. Our church is a place to find support for raising a family, the values and virtues which are so different from the larger culture. It's a family which welcomes people in and helps them feel loved. It's a community which challenges and teaches and shows us more about God in the world. Our church is a place to sing and make music with others, to grow closer to God and God's purposes, to find out what God wants of me and pursue that with friends. It's a community with a huge heart for our larger community and the world, a community which cares without judging.

One of the things I love about our church, which motivates my commitment, is its intergenerational nature. This week a 7-year-old taught me a valuable lesson. When the world is troubling and I am fretting, from now on I will remember his wisdom. Did you read it in the PresbEnews? "Don't worry, just pray." (Holland-days, PresbEnews 10/24/18) This week, a 90-year-old taught me another lesson. Living in an assisted living community, dependent on daily care, he is learning new depths of compassion. What I learned from him is that spiritual growth truly is our work throughout our lifespan. And I also like to hang out with teenagers in part because of what I learn from them. I learn that they care deeply about including people of different sexualities and gender identities, they care about justice and correcting the wrongs of the past, and they care about those who are poor and those who struggle with mental illness. Without the church, we would be in our small silos, struggling to make sense of this crazy world. With the church, we listen and learn together.

For at the heart of the church is the word of Christ, the good news of God's love for the world. My friend in Connecticut calls this "the church of opposites," meaning the opposite of what the world seems to believe. She illustrates:

- Instead of division, we offer unity.
- Instead of indifference, we offer compassion.
- Instead of anger, we offer peace.
- Instead of isolation, we offer community and fellowship.
- Instead of exclusion, we celebrate God's welcome.

(Sue Foster, fosteringyourfaith.com, 10/26/18)

When we hear and believe this word, how can we help but love God in return? The church gives us structure and guidance for expressing our love for God. Offering our money, our gifts, and our time is how we worship the God whose love gives us life.

We do it together, with gratitude. And then we are sent into the world to infiltrate it with God's message, God's goodness, and God's love, through our words and our actions.

The scripture instructs us, Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Everything?

Everything.

Everything from the way you drive to the kind of car you drive.

Everything from the food you share to the food you grow and eat.

Everything from the way you use words to the way you use your hands.

Everything from who you smile at to who you vote for.

Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

These are our marching orders, our directions for living a God-loving life. Together, we're on our way.

Maya Angelou, the poet who says "hot diggety," reminds us that we haven't yet arrived. She once said,

"I'm always amazed . . . when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'"

(<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/life-faith-takes-practice>)

Because this scripture is so well suited to a sending, a charge, I want to read it again. And in gratitude for the life of Eugene Peterson, who translated the Bible into the remarkable version called *The Message* and who died this week in Lakeside, Montana, at the age of 85, I will read his translation.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as

quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ-the Message-have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives-words, actions, whatever-be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

(Col 3:12-17, Eugene Peterson, 2002, *The Message*, NavPress, Colorado Springs)