

“Do It in the Name of Jesus” Colossians 3:12-17 Luke 2:22-40

How has your week between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day been? The gladness that Christmas symbolizes to the world should linger with us and not be tossed aside like so much used wrapping paper. Christmas means that hope and joy and peace and love have come into our midst; it means that you and I can be transformed people—made new into the likeness of Christ. Furthermore, newness of life is a most appropriate theme to emphasize on this Sunday that is also New Year’s Day.

Our Epistle Lesson this morning from Colossians speaks of this transformation, this newness of life; it is an exhortation to live rightly and to follow the perfect example given us by Jesus Christ. Let us carefully examine these words of St. Paul, and as we study them together, let the Spirit confirm them in our hearts so that we will allow them to make an impact upon the way we live.

We are told to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. At first hearing these may seem to suggest a certain weakness and ineffectiveness. Meekness and humility are certainly not the virtues most valued in our society today, with its penchant for ambition, assertiveness, and drive, but

the Christmas story reminds us of Jesus' humility, especially as we consider his birth in a stable. Compassion, kindness, and patience are all too rare today as so many people bite and claw to look out for number one. Christmas comes to remind us that life is best when we think of others and not only of self. In our fast paced lives it is easy to get so busy that we forget about our neighbors. We need the spirit of Christmas all year long to enable us to pause long enough to reach out to those who are lonely, or poor, or sick, or distressed.

In verse 13, Paul stresses one of the benchmarks of the Christian faith, which is forgiveness. We are simply told to forgive each other. I know I have said this over and over in sermons, but it is still true—we have got to take this to heart. Holding grudges is going to keep more people out of heaven than anything else I can think of. I have heard people talk about how they try to treat everyone right, and in the same breath complain about so-and-so who has mistreated them. Holding onto such hurts and slights only makes them fester, infecting our whole spirit with venom and bile, and blocking us from the forgiveness we depend upon from God. “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” This is the key to peace on earth.

Going on from this essential theme of forgiveness, St. Paul exhorts us to put on love above all else. Love is said to bind

everything together in perfect harmony. This description of harmony is so meaningful. We know how pleasing it is to hear harmonious sounds, like the music our choir and musicians always make, and how displeasing it is to hear discordant noises like car horns, squealing brakes, and yelling people. Harmony suggests cooperation and mutual concern, with everyone playing his or her part and depending on the others to do their parts. If we love each other, then we care as much about them as we do about ourselves. Harmony is an ideal of the Christian Church at all times. Perfect harmony may be rare, but it is our aim, and one we can attain if we do put on love above all else.

Every Christmas season we remember anew the songs of the angels, “Peace on earth, good will to men and women.” Jesus Christ is named the Prince of Peace, and in him we can find the only real and lasting peace. Paul urges the Colossians and us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. What is this peace? I think of it as a calm but confident assurance in the goodness and love of God expressed through our Lord and Savior Jesus. When we fully place our faith in God through Christ, then we have this peace, this feeling that God is in control and that we are in his care. The biblical saying, “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s,” comes to my mind when I think of this inner peace. With

this assurance within, we are freed up to stand for justice and righteousness regardless of its consequences.

St. Paul ends verse 15 with this simple direction, “And be thankful.” All of the joy and peace and hope and love which we possess are gifts from God. We do not attain these things through our own efforts—God freely gives them to us when we open ourselves to Christ. Thanksgiving is the culminating expression of the Christian’s whole life before God.

Verse 16 of our lesson contains a striking description of how the church is to act within its own fellowship. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” We see the interdependence within the community of faith. All of us are to help each other, for every person has something to share in the building up of the whole.

“In the name of Jesus”—do you do all you do in the name of Jesus? We are told to do this in the last verse of this Colossian lesson. Who can approach this precept without penitence and a change of heart? So much that we do is contrary to Jesus Christ. I have been struck this year with the hypocrisy that surrounds America’s celebration of Christmas. How can people observe this holy day and blithely wish everyone “Merry Christmas” when they

do not recognize Jesus as the Christ in their lives at all? How can people think that they are celebrating the birth of Christ when they do not darken any door of a church and do not do anything to help the poor? Most of the celebration of Christmas in America is not Christian, but we who are called to be our Lord's disciples must be leaven in the society. If we will do all that we do in Christ's name, then more and more people will see the transforming power of Christ alive in us and be won to him.

In this magnificent passage we have looked at today, St. Paul brings us back to the essential simplicity of the Christian life. High as his thought has soared, deeply as he has plunged into the mysteries of God and the universe in his struggle to overthrow the complex speculation of the false "philosophy" which is disturbing the Colossian church, he leads them and us back at last to the simple yet sublime beauty of the Christian character in which the truth of the gospel must flower—purity, kindness, truth, humility, love, peace, joy, and thankfulness of heart—the life in which Jesus is Lord of all and his name alone is named.

On this first Sunday in this new year, you and I cannot do better than to realize anew that such Christian character is what we need both now and forever. Devotion to Christ is timeless, and it is what we need today and for all the tomorrows to come. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.