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Colossians 3:15-17

16th Message

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RESURRECTION COMMUNITY

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

The cost to prepare for the high school trip to King City: loss of time for recreation and studies, tedious planning meetings. The difficulties on the King city trip: cold temperatures and sickness, money for medicine and loss of more time on studies. The result of the King City trip: priceless.

Every year the high school staff and students expend a great deal of time and energy in preparing for these few days of serving together in King City. There is no way to anticipate the results or measure the outcome. This is always the work of the Holy Spirit. The week for these students is giving space for God to work in their lives and for them to experience the raised-with-Christ life. There is the opportunity to serve others, share the gospel, and love children. But there is also the intangible effect that these few days have on the high school students themselves. One of the results that Ryan spoke about is the deepening of relationships and experiencing what it means to be a Christ-formed, resurrection community. What the high school students experienced in King City is a microcosm of what the church is designed to be as the body of Christ.

In the book of Colossians Paul tells the Colossian believers and us that we have been re-created in the image of God. In the old, tarnished creation we were dead, living in darkness. But now we have been made alive, united with Christ in every way – in his death, burial, and resurrection. Christ has changed everything. We are a new creation with a new nature and are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago my five-year old grandson Noah went to the doctor. When the doctor put the stethoscope on Noah's chest he began moving it around and asking Noah, "Is your heart here?" "Is your heart here?" "Noah, where is your heart." Noah responded, "I don't know, but it is where Jesus lives." This is true for all of us. Our life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Not only do we undergo a drastic individual transformation, but are now part of a corporate transformation. We have a new identity not only as a person, but also as community. Living in community now becomes an essential part of our life. We cannot be formed in Christ without planting ourselves and giving ourselves to a community. Why do I say that? It is because practicing resurrection takes place in relationships. God is personal and relational and we are learning to relate to others in the ways he himself relates to us. How can we learn to forgive others, love others, and be patient with others unless we have significant relationships?

The main manifestation of sin is damaged, unhealthy, broken relationships. That is what happened in the garden when sin entered the world. Relationships reveal sinful tendencies: insecurities and fears; need for approval and control; basing our identity on performance, possessions, and appearance. Now that we have a new self, a new nature, we can begin to relate differently. We abandon the old ways and adorn ourselves with Christ clothing. We began talking

about this last week and today we continue along the same lines in Colossians, chapter 3.

Let me read the three verses we talked about last week just to get us back in the flow of the text:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14 ESV)

Now Paul continues with more focused emphasis on the body of Christ:

**And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in one body.**

And be thankful.

**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.**

**And whatever you do, in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15-17)**

Everything in these six verses deals with relationships and, technically speaking, Paul is talking about life among believers in a local church community like the one at Colossae. Beginning with the next verse Paul will address how we practice resurrection in the family and at work and then in 4:5 Paul will mention outsiders. These six verses are one unit but also fall neatly into two parts of three verses each. The first three verses deal with aspects of the character of Christ we are to put on. The second three verses leave behind the old/new self motif and focus more on Christian community. Paul mentions four more ways that we are to practice resurrection.

Peace of Christ

The first exhortation deals with peace – "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body." The peace of Christ is the result of being reconciled to God through Christ. Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:14). Not only are we reconciled to God but also we are reconciled to one another. The cross tore down the dividing wall of the law that stood between Jew and Greek and all the other walls that divide human beings – male and female, slave and free, rich and poor, Cal and Stanford. (In verse 14, Paul says that love is the bond of perfection, while in Ephesians 4:3 he says that unity of the Spirit is maintained by the bond of peace. This suggests a link between love and peace).

The word “rule” originally was used of an umpire who presided over an athletic contest and awarded prizes. In a more general sense it meant to judge, decide, or control. The idea of peace here is not some individual, inner peace but rather a peace that is to hold sway over a community of believers.

The reason that peace is to rule over a local church is because believers are called in one body, the body of Christ, over which Christ is head. The church is a single, living organism, not just an organization. We are not called to one of three or one of ten bodies; we are called to one body even though we meet in many different local communities. Christ is the single head of a single body. Here at PBCC we are Asian and Indian, white and black, old and young, married and single, but we are one body.

Unity within a church is an essential factor. David writes in Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Psalms 133:1). The opposite of unity and peace is division and conflict. Division can occur because of class distinctions or differing personal agendas. Conflict can arise over petty arguments and unresolved hurts. These things cause people to take sides and to be guarded with each other. While there are certain things that are non-negotiable, most of the problems that divide churches and build walls between people are simply the result of differing perspectives, harsh words, jealousies, competition for power or control, and an unwillingness to submit to one another. These are the ways of the fallen nature that have been replaced by the new nature in Christ. We practice resurrection by allowing the peace of Christ to rule rather than the dominant personality or the most powerful group. In the body of Christ we experience the peace of Christ that reconciles and redeems relationships. How much brighter would the light of Christ shine if churches around the world paid heed to this one exhortation.

Now, certainly Paul has in mind the body of Christ but one could easily extend this exhortation into marriage, because marriage is a relationship designed for oneness and unity. We could also apply this exhortation in many family situations where honest and healthy conversation could heal wounds and restore people. Of course there can be many factors in relationships but as believers we must always seek to promote reconciliation and peace because that is what God did for us in Christ.

Perhaps you might ask “how is God inviting you into his peace today?” “How might God be calling you to do what you can to bring peace in your relationships?”

Thanksgiving

The second exhortation is simply to be thankful. This word thankful keeps showing up in Colossians (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2). We see it here in verse 15 and again in verse 17. Gratitude is a response to God’s grace. Love, peace, and gratitude reinforce each other. In Romans 1, Paul describes unbelievers as those who knew God but “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Romans 1:21). In 2 Timothy 3:2 Paul says that “ungrateful” will be a characteristic of people in the last days. Believers practice resurrection by the giving of thanks.

In this passage Paul intends something more than just a grateful attitude. Since the context is the body of Christ Paul has in mind outward expressions of thanksgiving as a result of what God has done in Christ. Paul intends that public praise be a regular part of meeting together.

An ancient Israelite practice was the prayer of blessing. The prayer would be begin with the words, “Blessed are you, Lord God, ruler of the universe,” and was completed by a statement that proclaimed God’s deeds. These prayers were an offering of thanksgiving to God. We have several examples in the Scripture (Psalm 72:18-19; Ex 18:10; 1 Kings 8:56-60). One example is how Paul begins the letter to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Eucharist meal is a thanksgiving meal – remembering and giving thanks for the body and blood of Christ.

I have often thought we should have more thanksgiving services than just at Thanksgiving. To hear how God met someone or how Christ has changed someone is unifying and uplifting. We are reminded that God is alive and working even in the midst of struggles and hardship. Just two weeks ago on Easter when Jon Doyel shared his testimony of what Christ had done we all stood and could not stop clapping. Tonight’s Pulse service is an opportunity for high school students to express to the body what God has done in Christ. Perhaps in our small groups we might regularly give time to reflecting and expressing gratitude for God’s grace, particularly God’s work of salvation in Christ.

Word of Christ

The third exhortation is to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” This exhortation receives the most attention of anything Paul says in verses 12-17 except perhaps forgiveness. Note that Paul says the word of Christ, not the word of God. We have to remember that there was no New Testament at this time. The word of Christ would be the truth about Christ, the gospel message of Christ, the person of Christ, the centrality and supremacy of Christ. We have talked about the fact that what the false teachers were promoting diminished the supremacy of Christ and this is why Paul exalts Christ repeatedly in this letter.

The word *dwell* comes from a word connected to “house.” Paul means for the word of Christ to make a home in the heart, to take up residence. The word *richly* means that this word is to be present with abundance. Beginning in October we are going to do something completely different here at PBCC. Instead of all of us preachers teaching from different books we are all going to contribute to studying the gospel of Luke. We hope that as a church we will be immersed in this text and the word of Christ will dwell richly among us.

The main exhortation is followed by three modifying clauses. The words are ordered in the Greek text a bit differently than many English texts:

**in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another
psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
in grace (gratitude) singing in your hearts to God**

You might notice how the first and third clauses balance each other. They begin with the same preposition and are followed by a participle. The first clause, “in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another,” gives the purpose for the word of Christ dwelling richly. You might recall the goal of Paul’s ministry from chapter 1: “Him we proclaim, warning (admonishing) everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). Paul’s goal for Christ-like maturity now extends to the entire church body. The word of Christ is used to teach and admonish each other.

Wisdom is another featured word in Colossians. The self-made religion of the false teachers had the appearance of wisdom (2:23) but true wisdom is hidden in Christ (2:3). Thus Paul prays in chapter 1 that the Colossians be “filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (Colossians 1:9–10). Wisdom implies that “the teaching and admonishing are given in a thoughtful and tactful manner.”¹

Scholars are divided as to how the second and third clauses function, i.e. what they modify. My take is that they both modify “teaching and admonishing.” Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs describe the means by which teaching and admonishing take place. The phrase “in grace (gratitude) singing in your hearts to God” describes the attitude or disposition that accompanies the teaching and admonishing. This is the sense of Paul’s thought in Ephesians 5: “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Ephesians 5:19). No matter how you read it though, teaching and admonishing take place through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in a public gathering.

It is very difficult to distinguish between the three forms of singing. Perhaps psalms are songs drawn from the Psalter. Hymns might include Christian canticles like the Magnificat, Benedictus, Nunc Dimittis, songs we find in Luke 1-2. They might also include the hymn-like material we find in Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:5-11, and 1 Tim. 3:16. Spiritual songs might refer to unpremeditated songs sung in the Spirit. Several years ago we had a woman here who would suddenly get a song from the Spirit for the edification of the body or an individual. It was a tremendous blessing. The word “spiritual” could apply to all three forms of songs. Together these three forms of songs describe “the full range of singing that the Spirit prompts.”²

Songs in the early church were about Christ and God’s work through him. They were an important medium used for teaching and exhortation and provided a significant way in which brothers and sisters edified one another and offered praise to God. Thus as the Colossians teach one another in psalms, hymns and songs inspired by the Spirit, so they are to sing thankfully to God with their whole being, i.e. with all their heart. We not only sing to God, we sing to and with one another.

Well, this verse gives us several things to reflect on:

First, we are all in the business of building each other up with the word of Christ. In our relationships we thoughtfully give others the truth of Christ that they might need in that moment: Christ as salvation, shepherd, king, priest, fortress, guide, grace, forgiveness, love, companion in suffering. We do this with great care and wisdom. You might also ask yourself this morning, what is the word of Christ that you might need right now for your life. The word of Christ is to dwell abundantly.

Second, the songs we sing in our gatherings are a tremendous means of teaching, and thus the songs themselves not only contain praise to God but also deep truths about Jesus. There are good songs and there are not so good songs. If the songs we sing give us the word of Christ then they are as important as the message; singing is not just filling time.

Third, in our times of public worship we sing not just with our lips, but also with all of our heart, our whole being; body, soul, and spirit. We sing to God and to one another with gratitude. The verse

underlies the importance of all of us being here together at the same time and fully present.

One of the ways I exercise is by riding my bike. I often ride alone so I won’t slow anyone down. But also it gives me a chance to listen to the songs we often sing here on Sunday mornings, old hymns put to new tunes. The words to these songs contain the word of Christ and many times a word or phrase will catch my attention and be exactly what I need at that moment. I need to know that his love will never fail or that I have been completely healed by his wounds and am forgiven. I am greatly edified as I let these words wash over me. This is what Paul has in mind when we gather for worship.

Rule of Life

The final exhortation sums up the entire section from verses 12-16: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Unlike the previous verse there is no trouble in understanding this verse. The word “everything” implies that this exhortation is universal in scope and entails every aspect of our life. Our whole life is lived in complete obedience to the Lord Jesus. We test and evaluate every word and every action according to whether or not we can attach to it the name of Jesus. We might call this exhortation a rule of life.

The name of Jesus speaks to his authority and lordship. It is the name that is above every other name and the name under which every knee will bow. God’s grace comes to us in the name of Jesus – forgiveness (1 John 2:12), eternal life (John 20:21), and Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

Once again we encounter the idea of thanksgiving. Gratitude accompanies every activity. We give thanks to God the Father through Christ. Christ has opened the way to the father’s presence and mediates our gratitude. This is similar to Paul’s word in Ephesians 5: “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20)

We are not given a set of do’s and don’ts that dictate our behavior, but rather an overarching principle to apply in each situation we face. We do not get a specific answer on every moral or ethical issue, but if we live in the name of Jesus we will be given more guidance than detailed and specific regulations. You might put this verse some place where you see it often.

Well, we are going to leave Colossians for a few weeks but during the summer we will be talking about how we practice resurrection in significant relationships like marriage, children, and work. But before we leave it there are two questions I want us to think about.

The first question is, “How do we do this?” After last week several people thanked me for the message, but I also sensed complete inadequacy in trying to do what Paul is talking about. We cannot practice resurrection in our own strength. Resurrection life by its very nature is the life of God. The power and strength, the wisdom and grace we need come through the indwelling Holy Spirit. We live in the new covenant, not the slavery of the law. The law cannot empower us. It can tell us what to do, but does not provide the means. The law only exposes our sin and our failure so that hopefully we will look to Christ. The letter kills, but the Spirit give life.

The second question is, “Why do we do this?” We know that we should because we call ourselves Christians. But why? The answer for me is that God has made a call on my life. He has called me out

of darkness, he has called me by name to be a part of his people, his treasured possession. The same thing is true of you.

I was reminded of this the other night. I was with a group of people and at the end of the evening we gathered in a circle, held hands, and sang *Amazing Grace*. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound/That saved a wretch like me/I once was lost but now am found/Was blind, but now I see. As we sang those words my mind flashed back to a May evening 40 years ago when I prayed to accept Christ. God put a call on my life and he has put a call on your life. He has called us to something very special.

Life in Christ isn't easy. There are many times when we want to give up and throw in the towel. There are times when we want to go back to Egypt and live simply for ourselves. But you know what – we can't do it, can we? Jeremiah, Jonah and Elijah all fought with God over this issue.

To grow as a community is very difficult in a place like Silicon Valley with its stresses, worldliness, and busyness. It is much easier in places like King City or Liberia or Yucatan. But this should not discourage or stop us from what God has designed for how we are to live with one another.

We are to have a vision of a new, redeemed humanity that entails a lot more than managing sin and looking like Christians. God has called us to have a vision of what it means to be his people, his chosen, holy, and beloved people, so that when the world sees us, it sees Jesus. We are the living, breathing, fleshy body of Christ to the world.

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

1. Peter O'Brien, *WBC: Colossians and Philemon*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 208.

2. O'Brien, 210.

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