



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Beloved

Colossians 3:12-17 & 1 Thessalonians 1:2-7

A sermon by William M. Klein

1 October 2017

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters^[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thess. 1:2-7 NRSV)

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. **13** Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. **14** Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. **15** And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. **16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. **17** 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. (Col. 3:12-17 NRSV)

1

So often we think "we are what we do." I am a pastor. You are a business person or a teacher or a realtor or a banker or a farmer or an electrician or whatever. We think what we do defines who we are. We equate what we do with our fundamental identity.

If that is the case, who are we when we retire or we become severely injured and can no longer do what we once did? Someone who **once was** a pastor or a banker or a plumber or a professor? Someone who **once was** someone? It doesn't take long being around someone who thinks of themselves in this way to realize they no longer have an identity. They once were someone...but are no more.

The Apostle Paul refers to the Christians at Colossae as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. He was saying those Christians and you and I are God's beloved. That is who we are. Ones beloved by God. That is our fundamental identity...an identity from which we never retire.

2

Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said, "We are Christian in order to become Christian." Knowingly or not, Rahner was drawing attention to something Paul said in the passage from Colossians. Specifically...**God chooses us**. We are Christian because of something God did and does for us over and over and over again. We are Christian because God acted on our behalf through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in ways that render us speechless.

Our role?...to respond. The initial choosing is by God. "As God's **chosen** ones, holy and beloved," writes Paul. To piggyback upon Karl Rahner's statement...**God** makes us Christian. We recognize what God has done for us, to us, in us, and through us...and out of a sense of profound gratitude, we commit ourselves to living up to the great honor. We are Christian in order to become Christian.

That is our great privilege...and that is our life's work. And just in case there is any confusion...I'm not suggesting our life's work is *to make ourselves* into Christians. Rather, I am suggesting our life's work is **gratitude**.

The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu have collaborate on a recent book they called *The Book of Joy*.¹ These two old friends have seen how so many people believe their life's work is the acquisition of money or power or status. They say what we all know...these things fail to bring inner peace. Outward attainment will not bring real inner joyfulness. They believe our life's work is joy...and this is found through gratefulness or gratitude.

Though the Dalai Lama is Buddhist and Desmond Tutu is Christian, there is a sense in which both believe our life's work is to wrap our hearts and minds around the fact that we are beloved...that we are beloved by God!

In what ways would your world change if saying "thank you" to God became your life's work?

3

Paul tells us that when we finally "get it" - when it sinks in that we are God's chosen ones, beloved by God...then we begin to bear with one another and to forgive one another. We become so much easier to get along with because...face it, what God has chosen to forgive about us is at least as great as the things we hold against one another. We can bear with and forgive one another much more readily when we remember we all stand before God empty handed.

When we realize we are God's chosen ones anyway...we begin to clothe ourselves in love. I have this mental picture of standing in the laundry room peeling off a set of old clothes and throwing them into a trash heap - and then pulling on a new set of clothes. This new set is tailor-made. The old clothes symbolize a long list of selfish or cruel or unforgiving habits. This new set of clothes is given to me by an act of love. This new set of clothes is love.

When you and I put on this new set of clothes the world looks different...so very different.

4

This morning I hope to impress upon you that the Christian life is about wrapping our hearts and minds around the fact that fundamentally we are God's beloved...and so is every person on the face of this planet. That is our primary identity. That is who we are.

Now, that does not mean our lives will ever be stress or struggle free. To thin that is what follows from following Jesus is foolish.

When I think of those people I know who stand out in my mind as good and faithful followers of Jesus, there is conflict - there are difficult times. But I also see within each of their lives forbearance and forgiveness. I hear laughter and playfulness. I observe affection. I feel welcomed into the warmth of their company. I see perspective. I see compromise. What I see is each trying to outdo the other in kindness, not in who wins the

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next argument. And I see people who remember being a Christian is a very human institution given to us by God to help us love and serve him and one another better.

In short, I see people who realize their life's work is **gratitude** and **joy**. They are busy wrapping their hearts and minds around the fact we are "God's chosen ones, beloved of God..." Their marriages, their friendships, their jobs, their public service, their interactions in the public square, their encounters with contentious and difficult adversaries – everything about their lives is an arena in which they say "thank you" to God.

Friends – absolutely nothing can or should replace your need of God. If you allow your marriage or your children or your families or your pleasure or your work or your desire to be right to occupy the most important place in your lives, then something has gone out of whack. You have fallen into idolatry.

Do not take the professions you have chosen too seriously. Your work is not meant to take the place of God. Your work is meant to be an arena in which you learn to love God. Or as the Sufi poet Hafiz suggested...When the mind is consumed with remembrance of God, something divine happens within the heart that shapes the hand and tongue and eye into the word "love."²

When the way you approach life becomes a means to love and serve God you will discover a greater capacity for concern, for suffering, for understanding, for sympathy... and also for humor, for joy, for appreciation for the good and beautiful things of life.³

5

Paul's words to the Christians at Colossi were meant to teach the early church what it looks like to live in a community of trust...a community equipped to love and serve God and to love others after the example of Christ. That is why he used words that speak to community life – words like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and harmony. That is why he concluded by saying: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

May your marriages, your chosen professions, your family life, your every social encounter bear witness to the fact that you truly are God's beloved. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Dalai Lama XIV, Desmond Tutu, & Douglas Abrams. 2016. The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World. NY: Avery Pub. (a subsidiary of Penguin Random House).

² Ladinsky, Daniel. trans. 1999. The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master. NY: Penguin Compass, 66.

³ Ellsberg, Robert. 2003. The Saints' Guide to Happiness. NY: North Point Press 6. Quoting Thomas Merton from *Life and Holiness*, 24.