

August 26, 2018
Lesson 13: Practicing Justice
Scripture: Colossians 3:5-17

Context:

The last lesson in this series on *Justice in the New Testament* takes us to the book of Colossians. The book is one of Paul's epistles, attributed to the time when Paul was imprisoned and writing to various early churches. Colossians reveals an understanding of Paul's mind and his understanding of pastoral ministry.¹ Much of the book is written to an audience that seeks to understand how Christ fits in the cosmos of which humanity finds itself.

Paul is writing the Christians at Colossae, a town in modern day Turkey. Colossae's population consisted of indigenous Phrygian and Greek settlers although Josephus notes that there was influx of several thousand Jews from Mesopotamia and Babylon who were moved into the area in the second century.² In Paul's day, the city was cosmopolitan with diverse cultural and religious elements.³ So many cultures coming together would have led to multiple issues, especially within the early church.

The diversity within the congregation would have been made up Jewish-Oriental people with Jewish religious elements and Greek-Phrygian people with Hellenistic religious philosophy and mysticism.⁴ Thus, Paul would have to speak the multiple languages of the people to help them understand unity as well as the inclusive nature of Christ. This letter was to help the Colossian congregation find their place with a new identity in Christ.

Our pericope this morning comes towards the end of this rather short letter. While the first part of the letter is more theological and discusses Christ's place in the cosmos, this part of the letter contains the application piece. Bringing out his moral theology, Paul deals with the "indulgences" that are blocking the people from authentic relationships. In the list of sins in verse five, he focuses upon sexual misconduct with the odd closing of greed to the list. For Paul, the focus is on the fact that people are greedy in ways that go along with lust. The old ways of the world focus on pleasure to the point that people do whatever they want with whomever they want. Such a libertine attitude leads to unbridled anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. People are lying to each other.

Paul urges the people to take off these old clothes and slip into something else; the garments of Christ. They are to drop the old practices and have their identity in him, not the past religions or groups from which they found their identity. As God's people

¹ Ralph P. Martin, "Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1991), 81.

² Ibid., 82.

³ Ibid., 82.

⁴ Ibid., 82.

they are to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. They are to be tolerant with one another and seek forgiveness when they are in the wrong.

The greatest garment they are to wear is love, which will bind them together. As they do, peace will come and they will become one body. Instead of old rituals and practices, they are to internalize the word of Christ. They are to share wisdom with each other by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. They are to be grateful to God and do all things in the name of Jesus Christ. The Colossians have a new identity that is not just for when they gather together for the Christian rituals. This new identity is to become a part of their calling as servants of God.

Application

Once again, our scripture lesson takes another treasured wedding classic and labels it as a piece about justice and doing life together. How appropriate though as we think about how we live together in God's kingdom. There are certain ways to be with other people whether they are our spouse or next-door neighbor that are to reflect our identity as God's children.

Here the author uses garment language to make a point about how we interact with others, just as we wear different clothes in different seasons. Yet clothes can also hide our bodies protecting our body parts underneath them. It makes sense when you think about it as our behavior can often be a mask as something we wear to protect ourselves. Sexual lust and greed are what we use to deal with our desire to be loved and known. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language hide our own insecurities and fears that may lurk beneath the surface. We at times all wear those clothes to help us cope with the ways of the world. It protects us from sometimes having to look in the mirror and figuring out what's going on.

Instead, at times we are to strip and to put on other clothes that are more flattering for us and for others. We are to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and patient. We are to forgive each other, as we will all mess up. We are to wear love as the main garment remembering that is a greater power than any other. We are to be peaceful seeking ways that do good instead of harm. We are to be thankful and grateful for God and for the relationships we have with one another. God's Word is to dwell within us giving us wisdom for how to interact with each other and we are to give gratitude with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. In other words, we are to take the words we say in church and use them in our language with each other.

As we read this passage, we are reminded that we will need to swap clothes from time to time. Like the changing of the seasons, there are times that we will have to slip into the garments of Christ when we realize certain things are happening within us. Sometimes it's obvious and other times it takes a little reflection. But when it does happen, it is as if that "aha" moment goes off as we look into the mirror and realize that something is not fitting properly.

In our daily lives, one of the ways we live justly is by remembering that even when there is conflict, we are to wear the garments of Christ. To put on armor and slip into the behaviors that Paul warns about will only take us so far. They may initially reveal something to us, but when we come to terms with the power they hold over us, we are to respond in a different way. We are to love others, listen to others, and give gratitude that Christ has done the same with us.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Associate Pastor
First United Methodist Church
1380 W. Main St.
Dothan, AL 36301
Office (334) 793-3555 ext. 240
E-mail: hunter@fumcdothan.org

