

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Colossians 3:1-11
August 4th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

Last week, the Dean and the Canon of Washington National Cathedral and the Bishop of the Diocese of Washington published an open letter titled "Have We No Decency?" The letter says: "We have come to accept a level of insult and abuse in political discourse that violates each person's sacred identity as a child of God..."

The letter goes on to say: "Make no mistake about it, words matter...Violent words lead to violent actions."

On the same day this letter came out, as if to punctuate the point, a billboard went up in North Carolina for a shop called Cherokee Guns that targeted four women of color serving as members of Congress. It has since been removed, but the stench of its evil lingers.

The Cathedral letter went on: "As leaders of faith who believe in the sacredness of every single human being, the time for silence is over. We must boldly stand witness against the bigotry, hatred, intolerance and xenophobia that is hurled at us...We must say that this will not be tolerated. To stay silent in the face of such rhetoric is for us to tacitly condone the violence of these words. We are compelled to take every opportunity to oppose the indecency and dehumanization that is racism, whether it comes to us through words or actions."

The letter from the National Cathedral is right to call out malicious behavior. With the letter to the Colossians, the two become one timely reminder to each one of us – to you and to me. The moral question *is* about our own sense of decency and the way that each one of us lives out our

baptismal promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

The promise we make and renew to God speaks to our obligation to care for one another, though we may disagree on what that means in practice. That baptismal promise recognizes our moral duty to promote fairness and equality, even with differences of opinion about what that looks like.

We start acting on our pledge of solidarity against bullies and those who dominate others by noticing and snapping a leash on our own indignation, animosity and malice until they are no longer our first response. The directions from the Epistle are focused on ourselves: “Put to death, therefore, whatever *in you* is idolatry.”

The letter to the church in Colossae points to moral imperatives that the National Cathedral letter left out. In addition to the shared foundations of care, fairness and liberty, researchers have found that all human cultures pursue a basic moral impulse toward varieties of virtuous leadership and followership that include a deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions.

Our recognition of legitimate authority comes in the moral stand we take in our baptismal vows to “continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.” Our authority is God, not a political party, not a government. Our tradition is God’s teaching, not an ideology.

Research show that human cultures also consistently share an instinct toward loyalty to groups of people for whom we are willing to self-sacrifice. For us, the baptismal vow to “seek and serve Christ in *all persons*, loving our neighbor as ourselves” sets the standard for who is in and who is out; who is worthy of our attention and inclusion.

Across cultures and throughout time, people have advocated various notions of the value of living elevated, more noble lives that honor the human body as sacred and worthy of protecting from harmful behaviors and potential toxins. These “purity concerns” are incredibly powerful and durable, and these anxieties are not unique to religious traditions.

In our baptismal vows to God, we take a stand to “persevere in resisting evil,” and promise God that, whenever we fall into sin we will repent and return to God.

Now, there’s a reason that we ask for God’s help in keeping all these promises. Most of us despise and can respond to cruelty when we see it by speaking out against it, just as we can when we see cheating or the betrayal of mutual agreements. Resisting evil becomes more challenging as we

navigate the fluctuating nature of human leadership and who has earned or lost our respect, as well as what it means behave properly as a follower.

And then there are our purity concerns. (Good Lord deliver us!) Here is where we probably need to return to God most often. Purity concerns present the greatest challenges because the more we learn about God's creation, the more our awareness shifts about what is threatening and what is not. New insights deepen our understanding about what scripture teaches on the topic.

Some of us are most strongly focused on our moral obligation to care for one another, while others consider purity of body and mind to be the utmost morality. If we are willing to curb our inherent attraction to labels and simplified lists of behavior, turning to God can harmonize these and more.

The challenge is not easy. And it is not new.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, the young church in Colossae was facing nearly the same situation with different details and less complexity. The author of the letter to the Colossians is most likely a second- or third-generation student of Paul offering a relatively faithful interpretation, at least in this part of the letter, of Paul's teaching for the new situation that the church is facing.

Having recently left the murky and fickle world of Greek or Roman paganism, the Colossian Christians have become attracted to the ideas of a group of Jewish mystical Christians who may have been early Gnostics.

This dodgy bunch promoted a philosophy based on an elaborate hierarchy of angels, powers and spiritual rulers that supposedly stood between the people and God. To win the approval of these cosmic powers involved rejecting the physical world in favor of otherworldly spiritual riches through severe self-discipline and adherence to poorly revised versions of Torah regulations.

These new codes offered well-meaning, serious-minded people a way of life that offered clear, bright and clean lines. It's just that they were not what Paul or Jesus taught.

The author of Colossians is reminding the church that Christian life is not a pious path that *ends* in God's grace in the future. The Christian life is a *consequence* of having received the mercy of Christ. It is precisely *because* we have stripped off our old selves in baptism that we are able to talk and behave like people who have been renewed by God's grace.

We already have a share in the risen life of Christ.

Consequently, every aspect of our humanity – our awareness, our intellect, our emotions, our social skills, our sexuality and, yes, our morality and ethics – *every strand* of what makes us human can reflect the reality that

we have been raised together with the Anointed. Every act and every word out of our mouth can be evidence that we have put on a new person; a person who is renewed in the image of the One who creates.

Rather than *causing* or *achieving* a relationship with God, the Christian moral response flows *from* that existing relationship. Our solidarity with Christ is forged in the initiation of baptism, and we maintain and deepen that solidarity by turning daily to Christ. We do our best, with God's help, and we support each other in cleansing ourselves of dispositions that distort the lives we have been given and the lives of others.

We choose something other than abusive language, and don't lie about or to each other so that we can align ourselves with God's ongoing work of recreating us into effective members of the embodiment of Christ – people who have been changed by the grace of God.

Only then can we speak words that help others reunite with God. Only then can we do our part in building a community of God where all people can give from the strength of their gifts, where people from all backgrounds, social status or upbringing can come together as many in one and Christ in all.

The author of the letter to Colossae, as Jesus and Paul preached, at the end of this reading clearly expects each Christian to learn what it means to be a genuine human being renewed in the image of God. To think, to seek truth, to do the hands-on work required to be the kind of human that the Gospel is meant to create.

We don't have to accept the deterioration of morality in the public sphere and the decay of basic human decency. We also don't need to be shaking an angry fist at other people as we retreat into ever-shrinking echo chambers.

There is a third choice. The third choice demands courage and a community of support.

We will have to look to ourselves first. Then, and only then, can we walk the path of grace that will lead to a holier and unknown future. Once we have cleaned up our own backyard, we can speak in the spirit of those who came before us in the faith; we can act like those who brought the vision of God's inbreaking heaven to light through the lives they led.

This very day, our souls are being demanded of us. And the things we prepare, whose will they be? The prophets, Jesus, Paul, the church in Colossae – they had choices to make.

So do we.

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