

MAKING THE MOST OF IT – Colossians 3:1-17

The Rev. Dr. Richard W. Reifsnyder
Salisbury Congregational Church
Salisbury, CT
July 10, 2016

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other.

Colossians 3:12-13

Lynn and I are big fans of Garrison Keillor, celebrated host of NPR’s Prairie Home Companion and were glad to get to see him at Tanglewood 2 weeks on his final tour before he retires. Was amazing—he did 1 ½ hour of encores. This is the end of an era for us baby boomers who have followed him for more than 30 years and appreciated his homespun comedy. He often claimed his mother had a standard response to any crisis in his life. “Make the most of it,” she’d say. “Mom, my voice is changing, and it’s embarrassing to have to sing in the eighth grade choir.” “Make the most of it, son.” “It was terrible, I tripped right in front of this girl I really like, and my books went sprawling. The kids all laughed. I’m so humiliated, I can’t go back to school.” “Well, son, things happen, you just have to learn to make the most of it.” Whatever the situation—if he broke his arm and lost a season of baseball, if his boss at his summer job made him work overtime when he had a big weekend planned, if he had a rough time mastering algebra 2—the response was the same, “Garrison, that’s the way life is sometimes. Just make the most of it. Turn it into something good.”

Maybe you’ve had such advice given to you, or have given your share of it. “Learn to bloom where you’re planted, accentuate the positive, deal with the hand you’ve been dealt.” My mother’s favorite expression was “take it in your stride,” though I was never quite sure what it meant. You didn’t make the basketball team, you lost the student council election, “Rich, take it in your stride.” I guess the idea was “keep going.” For Keillor the advice was maddening, in part because it was so simple and yet so sound. Certain circumstances **are** givens in life. You didn’t choose them, you can’t do much to change them, so the only real issue is how you respond. For better or worse, you’ve been

given a certain body and brainpower, you're stuck with a basic temperament, you've got the family you happened into. Not much you can do about that, but 'make the most of it.'

That's not bad advice when it comes for surviving and thriving in the church.

Reformed theology—that theology derived from John Calvin which has influenced the Congregational and Presbyterian and Reformed denominations--has traditionally made a distinction between the invisible and the visible church. The invisible church is the church of true believers, extending back through history, known only to God, those whose lives are “hidden with Christ in God,” as our text from Colossians says. The hearts of persons in this invisible church are pure, loving and good, fixed on Christ and his grace. The visible church, by contrast is messier. This is the outward church of folks who claim to follow Christ and do so with varying degrees of authenticity and integrity. The visible church is made up of those, like us, who show up on Sunday and cast their lot with the world of institutional religion. Wheat and tare are mixed in the visible church, and according to Jesus' parable, which is which is unknown until judgment day.

Many of us would not only like to believe that we are part of the invisible church but also to limit our interaction with those who are. When people say today they are “spiritual” but not religious, they are generally saying they don't have much interest in the institutional visible church and are expressing the natural longing only have to deal with the invisible, more pure, church. But our Congregational tradition make it clear that it is the visible church in which we must dwell and find our way as Christians. We have no such luxury of being purely “spiritual.”

So it is the visible church whom Paul challenges to live in particular ways. He uses this imagery of getting dressed up with the right behavior. “Put on the attire of Christ, clothe yourself, get dressed up in this way. You've got a decision to make. Listen again to this text—put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other..above all clothe yourself with love, which binds everything in perfect harmony...and be thankful...let Christ peace rule in you...let God's word dwell in you...and whatever you do, do everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.” What a beautiful statement of the life we are to live. It is the passage of

Scripture Lynn and I had read at our wedding. In VA we had “Colo 312” on our license plate. It was not some cryptic comment about our love for Colorado, a John Denveresque desire for a Rocky Mountain high. Rather it was a statement of our intentions to live according to Colossians 3:12, to live, as best we can, in a Christ honoring way. (Our other car had on its license “CT bound”—now that was obvious!)

Of course, in 41 years of marriage (our anniversary is Tuesday), we have discovered that these spiritual clothes we have tried to put on don’t always fit us so well, and so we don’t always look like “beautiful people fashion models” for the Christian faith. It isn’t my natural disposition to be forbearing of others and have patience, and do everything in perfect love. These Christian clothes may look a little lumpy on me because I tried to put them on over the clothes I already had, and ignore the message that I may have to take some things off, to get myself clothed properly. Paul tells us what we need to take off before he tells us what to put on: “Put to death the clothes of anger or greed or nastiness or dishonesty, or sarcastic and abusive tongue.” In v. 9, Paul talks of having “stripped off the old self with its practices and having clothed ourselves with the new self,” but sometimes the evidence doesn’t show we’ve succeeded. When I’m excusing my being late again or obsessing over some detail in our domestic life to a non too happy spouse, it’s tempting to say, “Well you’re married to me, so make the most of it.” Lynn doesn’t seem to find it all that amusing.

The reality doesn’t always measure up to the ideal. What is true in marriage is certainly true in the life of the church. Of course this passage is not fundamentally about marriage. It is about the church, and the visible community of believers, which has this extraordinarily elevated expectation of behavior, and has to live with the messiness of the actual reality.

Some of us are happy to be part of a pure, invisible church. It’s just that we don’t want to get tainted by the flesh and blood community, the visible church. Novelist Reynolds Price taught at my Alma Mater for many years and wrote stories which were saturated with religious themes. He also did his own translations of the gospel and was deeply shaped by his attraction to Jesus. Yet Price also speaks for many of our time in wanting to be spiritual without being churchy. Though church was important in his formation, he wasn’t involved for most of his adult life. “Churches seem to be perilously

close to social clubs,” who expect “a frenetic kind of social commitment of a sort that I don’t want. If I have social time, (he wrote) I want to spend it with people that I care deeply about; I don’t want to be making brownies for the church picnic.” And yet he lamented that his unchurched nieces were growing up without being shaped by a religious fabric that had been so crucial to his own well-being. Perhaps like our own nieces or grandchildren or friends—who have become part of the so called “nones” N-O-N-E-S. Where will attitudes of compassion and care for neighbor, and peace and humility and forgiveness be nurtured if not by the church, the visible church, the flesh and blood church, in all its messiness?

To be sure, people sometimes create fantasies which ignore the realities of the visible church. Occasionally someone will say, “It must be great working in the church—with everyone a Christian, who is kind and loving and supportive and giving, and gets along with everyone else. It must be wonderful not having to deal with stress and dishonesty and nastiness and irresponsibility. Must be a little like heaven itself.” I want to say, “you haven’t spent much time around churches, have you?”

I am struck by the biblical images of the church—body of Christ, household of faith, family of God. These are not images which suggest smooth sailing. The image of a body, each part important and all working together harmoniously, is a beautiful ideal—but the reality is, that bodies—at least my body, doesn’t always function that smoothly. There are times my arthritic joints are aching, and there is a crick in my neck, and gas pains are upsetting my stomach. The household and the family images present a beautiful ideal, but dig beneath the surface of any family I know and you’ll find folks jealous of each other, or hardly speaking because of some incident which happened years ago, or siblings disputing about who is taking more of the brunt of caring for an aging parents, or some scandalous behavior we’d rather not mention. Families have to figure ways to “make the most of it,” to hold together and work constructively in spite of their tendency to be more like TV’s “Modern Family” than Ward Cleaver’s.

It comes as no surprise that most church families are messy. What’s extraordinary is that God so often puts us together and says to us, “make the most of it,” find ways to let my grace shine through. And that’s really the beauty, the miracle of it, how God continues to use this strange mixture of people who often would have no

earthly reason to be together, other than that God has reached out and touched them and said, “You belong to me, now learn to live like members of my family.” The church I serve in VA included a number of people heavily involved in politics—but on opposite sides of the issues. (VA is a purple state you know) I remember one election year looking out and seeing a man who was running for county supervisor sitting on one side and a leader of his opposition sitting on the other side. After the service, one of the men came and said to me, “You know, I can hardly stand to be in the same room with that guy. I don’t trust him, don’t respect him..but (he said) But.... you keep reminding us that Christ loves him, dies for him, forgives him too...and I find I leave here, at least for a time, remembering we are family, and I’ve got to learn to look at him differently.” Not fully a person who has clothes himself with love and forgiveness, and thankfulness, but a start.

We’re messy in the visible church. I don’t know about this church, but I suspect that here, as in every church I’ve served, there are some of us who just don’t get along that well, or who feel misunderstood, or who are unhappy because we feel we’ve been insulted, ignored, or trivialized by someone else. Or we don’t like the changes we see and get frustrated others don’t see it our way. But here we are, worshipping the same God, struggling to be the persons God wants us to be and knowing the contradictions within. A colleague was asked what he had learned in more than 50 years in the ministry. “That the possibilities for being misunderstood are infinite,” the man replied.

God puts us together, with all the messiness and rough edges, and the infinite possibilities for being misunderstood and then tells us, “make the most of it, learn to work together, allow the situation in which you are placed shape you, look for evidences of grace in your midst. Figure out how you can be forgiving and forbearing and thankful for each other, how you can show patience and love and correct each other when necessary—none of which is easy.”

Again and again I’ve found myself surprised by the grace of God in this messy place. A friend of mine who teaches at Pittsburgh Seminary has made an extensive study of religion in post-communist society. When he first visited Russia in 1988 he despaired over the future of the church there after 70 years of official atheism. It’s just a bunch of old ladies, he said, not much hope there. (Not that’s there’s anything wrong with

old ladies let me assure you!!) But it turns out the faithfulness of those women was the catalyst for a remarkable resurgence of the evangelical churches in that land since the fall of the Soviet Union. It was easy to get frustrated by a curmudgeon of a man in a church I served whose conversation consisted mostly of complaints—about the national church, about the way the budget was spent, about bleeding heart church folks trying to help those who didn't deserve it. But when we asked for visitors to help with hospital visitation he was the first to sign up. And there was the woman who never seemed to grasp either my sermons or my grand vision for revitalizing this little church in upstate New York. But every time a child died in that town, she, who had lost a five year old son in a tragic bicycle accident, went to talk with the family, and shared her faith that there life after loss. This is the church with all its messiness showing glimmers of grace.

Like all of us, I can get frustrated at times with the failure of the church to be all that it can be. But at the core, this is my home, my family. I love this extraordinary community of people in process, struggling to make the best of it, as we put off the old ways and dress ourselves in the clothes of Christian character. It is easy to get focused on the things that show our imperfections, but I'd rather focus on the things that are right with church. I'd rather try to see the big picture and look for evidences of grace, and appreciate imperfect people, thrust into circumstances not of their choosing, who are learning to make the most of it. Every day provides an opportunity for us to “count our many blessings, name them one by one,” and see, as the old gospel hymn puts it “what God has done.” We dare not expect too much perfection of this messy community, for we'll be disappointed. But neither should we expect too little. God isn't finished with us yet.

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST