

**Clothed.....**  
**Colossians 3: 12-18**  
**Don Lincoln**

Two ladies have been friends for many decades. Over the years they had shared all kinds of activities and adventures. They had raised kids at the same time, vacationed together with their families, traveled the world with their husbands as empty nesters, had met each other's grandchildren, and had comforted each other when each one eventually buried her husband.

They are now somewhat chronologically advantaged, so their activities are mostly limited to meeting a few times a week to play cards.

Recently they were playing cards when one of them looked at the other and said, "Now don't get mad at me.... I know we've been friends for a long time.... but I just can't think of your name! I've thought and I've thought, but I just can't remember it. Please tell me what your name is."<sup>1</sup>

Her friend glared at her. For, like FIVE MINUTES her friend just glared at her. And then, finally, she replied, "How soon do you need to know?"

Absolutely central in the letter to the Colossians is Paul's desire for his readers to KNOW – to KNOW, in no uncertain terms - WHO THEY ARE. It's what we've been preaching for 5 weeks – each sermon different, but all headed in the same direction. No surprise, because we're all preaching from the same, short letter to the Colossians, and its 1,582 words. 1,582 words. Every sermon in this series has had more words than the letter itself. We're trying to make sure you get the message that Paul is driving home!!

Paul says to the Colossians – God has accomplished a cosmic rescue mission in Christ, and transferred you to an alternative Kingdom. Alternative to Rome. THIS is who you are; citizens of that Kingdom. In Christ, through Christ, with Christ. Your life is lived by Christ in you, the hope of Glory. There's nobody like Jesus. Don't let anybody try to fool you – or tell you to add to or subtract from life in Him.

Be all you were meant to be in Jesus Christ. Rooted in Him; grounded in Him. Grow mature in the knowledge of Him; be confident in this Good News you have received. "Again, my friends in Colossae, receive what God has already done for you and live gratefully in response".

Today's text starts off hammering that home in a new way. **AS God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.** Do you hear the allusion to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Israel and the twelve? Chosen. What an extraordinary starting point in life, to know you are **chosen by God**, valued by God, sacred to God, loved by God. Paul wants this identity to sink in deeply.

Because, as Pastor Ann said last week, the lists of behaviors Paul mentions in Colossians are not a means to earning that status as holy and beloved, they are the very **outworking of KNOWING our status** – as **chosen, holy and beloved**. Do you get that? Paul makes it clear it's the awareness of this truth – chosen, holy and beloved – that generates within us a new set of attitudes, a new way of living, a new way of behaving, a new way of being, which allows us to let go of the old ways.

Enables us to let go of the old ways of aggression when we feel our value is being threatened. We don't need it because we know we are valued. Enables us to let go of the old ways of manipulation and self-obsession where our agenda is only focused on winning the affection of others. We don't need that anymore because we know we are loved. Enables us to let go of the old ways of power we turn to when we sense the only way to matter in this world is to control or subjugate others.<sup>2</sup> We can let go of those ways Paul says.

Paul wants to make it clear. When you and I take seriously that we are "**chosen, holy and beloved**" by God, we no longer need the array of strategies that keep so many people busy trying to make themselves special – or get themselves on top. We're freed from those anxieties. Freed to then have energy and space and love for those around us.

Here's the acid test for whether Paul is talking sense or not. If you weren't here last Sunday, listen to these snippets of the misbehaviors Paul talked about in verses 5-9. Paul says, "Put to death, therefore get rid of, fornication, impurity, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, don't lie to one another. There's all the misbehaviors. Then listen to verses 12-17, where you heard: clothe yourself, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgive each other, clothe yourselves with love, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Just imagine if there was town from the earlier verses living ALL according to those first verses of anger, slander, malice, fornication, greed, meanness, lying to one another.

Ask yourself this: Supposing there was a town in which everybody behaved in the way described in verses 5-9. And supposing, a few miles down the road, where everybody behaved in the way described in verse 12-17. Where would YOU rather live?<sup>3</sup>

Paul wants the Colossians – and **US** to know – THIS is the way the chosen, holy and beloved live. Not because we **MUST DO SO** in order to earn God's grace, but because we **CAN DO SO** – as we are fully and completely confident in God's choosing us, in God's valuing us, in God's loving us.

Knowing that, you and I are enabled to love; to forgive; to teach – with kindness, humility, compassion. We clothe ourselves in these garments, as they are the very things we have had poured into our lives by Christ. That's what enables you and me to live it out in Christian community with each other.

One of my favorite verses in this text is Paul's commendation to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. There is a whole sermon is just that verse alone particularly for those who love to sing. Our last hymn, *God is Glorified*, is a testimony to that.

**And THEN come the household codes.** Did you catch that little pause before I said "WIVES?" – wives, husbands, children, parents, fathers, slaves, masters. You may recognize, or suspect that this is one of the texts used for centuries to JUSTIFY slavery, and certainly a text used to justify the domination of a patriarchal society, where men ruled their households with an iron fist – the ultimate, sovereign authority in all things.

Paul has been talking about human life being transformed by coming under this surpassing authority of Christ. BUT – Paul knows there are structures and institutions in place that will steadfastly resist transformation.

Slavery and patriarchy are a fact in Paul's world, and while in tension with the Gospel, they're not going away soon. That's not a practical possibility and Christians have no leverage politically or socially in the culture. BUT – Paul describes with Christ as head; as Christ as the supreme authority in all structures, and with mutual respect for one another, these institutions can be revolutionized from the inside out, without the outward forms ever changing appearance.<sup>4</sup>

In the July 14 sermon, pastor Jon, and in the class on the opening of this letter that I taught at the same time, he and I both quoted from Rachel Held Evans' writing, "The Letter to Nympha's church." Nympha is the leader of the house church in Colossae. She's named at the end of the letter to the Colossians. It is Rachel's stunning first person accounting of a young woman in the church meeting in Nympha's house, as she hears Paul's the letter to the Colossians read out loud.

Then I hear Nympha say, "Wives subject yourselves to your husbands."

The words jolt me, not because they are foreign, but because they are familiar. In Rome, peasant and patron alike memorize the household codes at an early age so you know your place in life, the most influential code having been composed by Aristotle, who taught that the male head of the house functions as sovereign over the inherently inferior women, children, and slaves. After all, Caesar believes a well-ordered state needs well-ordered households. Like the emperor would have it.

Then Nympha's voice grows quieter and I see one of her eyebrows rise.

"Husbands, love your wives..."

We sit in stunned silence. This is new. I've only heard of very wealthy couples who married because they were in love. Most, like my husband and I, are joined together in a business transaction. (I was twelve-years-old at the time.) No one expects all husbands to love their wives.

“Children obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.” Again, this is somewhat familiar.

But Nympha continues: “Fathers, do not provoke your children...” (I have a feeling Aristotle never said anything like that to the fathers he knew.)

Then things get really strange. Nympha hesitates before she continues. Because **everyone** knows who is next in the household codes.

“Slaves obey your earthly masters. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” “Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”

At this the room erupts. Slaves with an inheritance? Masters with a master of their own? I feel sorry for the few wealthy men among us because suddenly, every eye is on them. Is Paul suggesting both slaves and owners share a Master? Is he challenging Aristotle by suggesting the two might be equals?

At our meal, everyone’s talking about the letter, but I am lost in thought. **Maybe, like Jesus, we can refuse to play by Rome’s rules without breaking any of Rome’s laws.** Maybe we remain faithful to Jesus, not by overturning the household codes, but by transcending them, living in a way that highlights the foolishness of the hierarchies they contain and the foolishness of the empire in mutual love.

**Christ is the Head of this Home—the Church—so here, we submit to one another out of reverence for him.**

Sure we have titles – husbands, wives, slaves, masters – but Paul says in Christ we are neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek.

Later, Nympha will read other letters, letters that speak of husbands loving their wives as much as Christ loved the church, willing to give their lives for them, and of Christians “submitting to one another” and living as “slaves to one another”!

No Greek or Jewish philosopher or Roman legislator had spoken to women, children, and slaves directly like this. None had given us this much agency, let alone this kind of dignity. The point, Nympha says with a wry smile, is to imitate Jesus, not Rome.

The night after the first letter, my friend Drucilla and I creep quietly through the streets together, arm in arm on our way home, I wonder aloud if there will come a day when there will be no more household codes, if Drucilla and I will be treated with as much dignity as my husband and if slaves will no longer have earthly masters.

“Well, friend,” Drucilla whispers back, “Hasn’t God promised to make all things new?”

Then I have a dangerous thought: **“Maybe this is how it starts.”**

Transforming the world from the inside out. Sisters and brothers, this is the way God works – in hearts; in homes; in congregations, in communities, in nations.

When you and I **KNOW WHO WE ARE** – when we KNOW WHO WE ARE as God’s chosen, holy and beloved, forgiven and redeemed in Jesus Christ, when we know who ALL God’s children are holy, beloved, and forgiven and redeemed in Jesus Christ – then we live not in Rome’s way – but in **HIS** way - **HIS WAY** – in the world.....

Not the way of hatred, anger division and fear, but the way of patience, kindness, humility, compassion, peace, forgiveness and love.

May it be so. AMEN

1. Mikey’s Funnies, [www.mikeysfunnies.com](http://www.mikeysfunnies.com)
2. William Loader, Murdoch University, First Thoughts on Year C Epistle Passages from the Lectionary.
3. NT Wright, Paul for Everyone, *The Prison Letters*; commentary on Colossians 4.
4. The Rev. Dr. Mark Achtemeier, author, theologian, former professor of New Testament from Dubuque Seminary, SKYPE conversation with Westminster team about the Letter to the Colossians.
5. Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired* – chapter entitled “The Letter,” Thomas Nelson Publishing.