**Putting on the Christ**

**Text: Colossians 3:12-15**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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An Episcopal priest plopped down in an easy chair after a tough day of ministry. His wife made him a cup of tea as he talked about it. He said, “Honey, I was putting out fires all day. There were fights about building use, and the by-laws, and who’s in charge of the kitchen, and whether something is the responsibility of this committee or that committee, and my associate was arguing with the office administrator. It was just one darn thing after the other. You know, if the saints would behave themselves I might have time to deal with the sinners!”

Perhaps Paul had a similar thought as he wrote to the Colossians. We’ve seen how they were engaged in an eclectic approach to religion, caught-up in rituals and beliefs and dietary practices that had nothing to do with their new life in Christ. We noted last week both their failure and ours to recognize how, in Christ, all things are bound together. Today, in chapter 3 of this letter, Paul tries to remind these saints what it really means to live in Christ; what kinds of actions ought to flow from having been chosen by God and woven into the tapestry of grace. He says, “Listen-up, people. You have to focus on the Master and master the basics: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Mix in a healthy dose of forgiveness. And always be thankful.

Focus on the Master and master the basics. Clothe yourselves with these things, Paul says. For when you put on compassion and kindness and gentleness and forgiveness, you are putting on love, “which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:14).

Focus on the Master and master the basics. That’s good advice for any congregation; any community that has been chosen by God in Christ and blessed with the gift of faith. Like the two long established congregations in a big city that were only a few blocks apart, so they decided to amalgamate. There were lots of issues that had to be negotiated, of course, and when a report was made about how things were going it was noted that finally, after a long and arduous debate, they’d agreed on the color the choir robes. The chairperson of the meeting said, “That’s great that such a tough and important question has been decided. Now we can go on to the easy stuff, like peace in the Middle East!”

Man, it’s hard to master the basics. It’s so easy to get focused on the side issues and the less important things; so easy to lose sight of the big picture and the high priorities. So we get focused on the little stuff, and then our egos get caught-up in whatever it is that we’re bickering about, and it’s a mess.

That’s why, by grace, we have to master the basics: kindness and gentleness and all the rest In fact, we can start to work on those the next time that we find ourselves working together on some project and getting all hot and bothered about some diddly little thing. Pastor Helen asked a group of children to reflect on these verses in Colossians 3. Regarding kindness, one 9 year old said, “In order to work with people you have to be kind, even if you don’t want to.”

Wow! Talk about out of the mouths of babes! “In order to work with people you have to be kind, even when you don’t want to.” And that doesn’t mean being kind only if the *other* people are willing to be kind. Sometimes the person of faith has to take the first step and model Christ-like behavior; being maybe the only person in the room who’s trying to be kind. That’s a prime example of putting on the Christ; of clothing yourself in his virtues. I mean, Jesus could engage the scribes and Pharisees in heated debate…and then he’d sit down and have dinner with them. Whether or not they were kind to him, he was going to be kind to them. And his advice to us is this: “Go and do likewise.”

Not easy, is it? Especially when someone is being mean to you. That’s where patience and forgiveness come in. As another 9-year-old said, “If someone is being mean to you, it could mean that there is something wrong in their life.” Again, wisdom from the mouths of babes!

“If someone is being mean to you, it could mean that there is something wrong in their life.” How often do we take the time to wonder what might be behind someone’s less than kind behavior? When someone is being less than cooperative, or difficult to work with, or downright mean, it is so tempting to respond in kind. But what a blessing it can be to take the time to step back and imagine what’s happening in their lives. What burdens are they bearing? What issues are they wrestling with? And how might I be exacerbating all of that by being just as mean to them as they are to me? From such imagination and patience flows forgiveness. And with forgiveness comes renewed strength to practice kindness and compassion and gentleness.

As I said, it’s a blessing. When you imagine the burdens that another person is bearing, and then you respond with patience and forgiveness, you’re really doing yourself a favor. Because with forgiveness comes as well a letting go of the anger and frustration that’s been building-up inside of you toward that person who’s giving you such a hard time. But when you fail to forgive, you’re the one who’s stuck with the burden. I’ve quoted Frederick Buechner on this before, but it bears repeating: The failure to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. That’s why forgiveness is not just a theological concept, it’s a practical necessity. As Paul says, “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13).

Focus on the Master, and master the basics. When we fail to do this – especially when we fail to forgive – we fall into the trap of complaining about each other. Paul says that when someone has a complaint about you, that should be the prelude to forgiveness. Instead it’s often the prelude to getting a third person involved. I mean, when Jimmy has a complaint against Johnny, does he go to Johnny and try to resolve the problem? No! He goes to Diane and complains about Johnny!! And if he doesn’t get enough sympathy from Diane, then he goes to Betsy! And with each complaint he gets hot and bothered all over again and it just makes the situation worse. Sometimes this kind of thing can go on for years. Folks, I want to let you in on a little secret: it’s a whole lot easier to just go to the person that you have a complaint against and talk it out. It’s easier on you, and it’s easier on the community where all of this complaining is taking place.

And it’s finally the health of the community that Paul is driving at. He’s concerned about the Colossians tearing away at the fabric of their community of faith with their conflicting beliefs and practices, with their complaints and their grudges and their failure to fully clothe themselves in the Christ and his virtues. It is clear that this is his chief concern when he says, in verse 14, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Love, you see, is not some sentimental feeling. No, it’s hard work. When Paul talks about love, he’s talking about the hard work of patience and gentleness and forgiveness and forbearance that binds a community together. The Greek word for love here is *agape*, which is the kind of selfless love that puts the interests of others ahead of one’s own interests, that puts serving others and caring for others ahead of one’s own needs. And when a whole group of people do this for each other, everyone is cared for, and the community is strengthened. Another child told Pastor Helen that if we all practiced this kind of love, “No one would have any problems or anything!”

Focus on the Master, and master the basics. And when you do so, you’ll find your life to be increasingly infused with…thanksgiving. “Be thankful,” Paul says, as if thanksgiving is something that can be commanded. Well, I can’t order you to be thankful, but I can remind you of the blessings of being patient and kind and forgiving. And when you put these things in practice and put on the Christ, you’ll find that thanksgiving follows as part of the package.

11 years ago, when my brother and I were hiking on the Appalachian Trail, we fell in with several other small groups of hikers, and a kind of instant community was formed. When one person fell behind, two others held back a bit and kept on eye on him. When another person ran out of water, one of the guys shared some of his. When a third guy got to acting a little crazy, we all pulled on a little extra patience and helped him the best that we could. And by the time that I was done with that hike, I was feeling so thankful that it’s hard to put it into words: thankful for the guys on the trail, thankful for the beauty of the Smokey Mountains, thankful for water (‘cause guess who was the guy that ran out?) thankful for all of the ways in which the Master weaves us together in love. That’s what happens when you master the basics. But you can’t do it on your own. It flows from when we – all of us – focus together on the Master, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. When you cloth yourself in him, all sorts of good things follow. Amen.