

Together for Good Sermon Series
Together We Grow
Colossians 3:1-17
By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge
November 1, 2020

Today we come to the third week in our stewardship sermon series *Together for Good*, and the big idea of this series is that being the church is together work, and that God works through our togetherness and uses our togetherness to accomplish good things both in us and through us. My hope is that each week as we are thinking about these different things that Christians do together, that we will be thinking about how we do these things and experience them together at Lakewood, and as we think about our experiences at Lakewood, I hope and pray that we will be filled with gratitude for what we have received here and inspired to go on giving and using all of our gifts so that this church continues to be alive and active and fruitful. We have talked so far about how we worship together and how we belong together and exist as a place of belonging for others, and this morning we turn to the subject of spiritual growth and how important togetherness is to our progress in becoming conformed to the image of Christ.

Our Scripture reading this morning comes from another letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Colossae. Paul was not the founder of this church, we're told in Chapter 1 that they had learned about Christ and been instructed in the faith by a man named Epaphras, but Paul writes to encourage them because some in the church were being enticed and led astray by false teachings. They were mixing philosophies and spiritualities that were popular in the surrounding culture with Christian wisdom and spirituality and the resulting mixture was not the truth as God had revealed it in Christ. Paul writes to help get them back on track and to clear up any misconceptions about the person and work of Christ, and he encourages them to stay connected to Christ and to each other so that they can continue to grow in holiness and love.

The subject of spiritual growth or growing in holiness is at the heart of the passage that we're looking at this morning, and it's a subject that should never be far from the mind and heart of Christ's followers. When we respond to Jesus and accept the invitation to be forgiven and to begin a new life in him, that is the beginning of a journey down a long path and not the destination. I remember reading a book by Tony Campolo where he talked about how silly it would be if you had a group of runners at the starting line and when the starting gun went off everyone stepped over the starting line and then just stopped running. That makes no sense, but if we come to Christ and say "thanks for forgiveness" and then go on with our lives without developing a relationship with him, or learning from him, or devoting ourselves to becoming like him it's kind of like stepping over the starting line and not finishing the race.

So growth and progress, moving from what we are to what God says we can be in Christ, is something that is meant to happen in our lives as Christians, and in Colossians 3 which is our text for this morning, Paul gives us a picture of what that process is like. He likens it to changing clothes. Before knowing Christ, we wore a wardrobe that fit in with the trends and styles that are all around us, but after being made new in Christ the

old clothes don't really fit anymore and we need to clothe ourselves differently. Let's listen to how Paul says it now in Colossians 3:1-17.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ 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! ¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This Scripture makes me think of a show I used to love watching called *What Not to Wear*. Sloppy dressers, people with terrible fashion sense, or people with the habit of wearing clothing that was inappropriate for their age were all the kind of people that friends would nominate to be the subject of an episode. At the beginning of each episode, the show's hosts would go through the person's closet with them, usually throwing out everything, and then they would go on a \$5000 shopping spree to get a whole new wardrobe. The first 11 verses of this passage are a lot like those tv hosts going through the closet with their client. In the same way that a tube top and a mini skirt are not the fitting fashion choice for women of a certain age, Paul says that there are behaviors and practices that are not fitting for those who have been raised with Christ. Even if those are the things that everyone else is doing, Paul urges them to lift their thoughts higher than what is going on all around them and remember that though unseen spiritual realities are unseen, they are not unreal. You are alive and a new in Christ, and your outer "garments," or way of living and being, ought to reflect that reality.

He then turns to what they *should* be wearing. You need a whole new wardrobe, he says, and going back to the tv show, this is like the part of the show when the hosts and their client go shopping to look for clothing that fits and accurately represents who the person under all of those old, awful, ill-fitting clothes really is. Compassion, kindness, humility, patience, meekness and above all love. These are the kind of things that a

Christian ought to be wearing. These garments are the ones that reflect who you really are in Christ.

At an intellectual and even emotional level, all sincere Christ followers want to love and be more like Jesus and we like the idea of putting on new clothes, but practically, sometimes letting go of the old clothes and embracing the new wardrobe isn't so easy. Sometimes we are comfortable in the old clothes, and sometimes we may be swept up by the opinions of others who might say that the old clothes are just fine. *Everyone* is wearing anger, and greed, and malice, and sexual immorality. Why shouldn't you?

If you watch *What Not to Wear*, you get a glimpse of how difficult changing wardrobes can actually be. At the start of the show when the hosts go through their client's closets and throw it all in the trash, the clients often have a hard time letting go of their old favorite clothes. They are never as convinced as the hosts are that their clothes should go in the trash and sometimes, they argue about why they need to hang on to a particular item. And then, when it comes to the shopping trip, it's usually not easy. When I used to watch it, I used to daydream about how fun it would be to be given \$5000 to go spend on quality new clothes and shoes, but in reality, most of the time that shopping process turns out to be an arduous process. They try on clothes that they aren't used to and even though they look beautiful, they feel uneasy at first and wish for their old things back.

The process of growing in Christ can be difficult in this same way. We want to be like Jesus but when we find out it's hard and uncomfortable, sometimes we want to retreat to our old ways. Or, when we find that our new behaviors and actions put us out of step with the people or culture around us, we may want to go back to behaving in ways that allow us to blend in. Sometimes maybe we just have doubts about whether the full wardrobe change is really necessary. Growing spiritually and becoming mature in Christ is difficult, and it's a process that happens over time, and it often feels like very slow process, and *that* is one of the reasons why we are meant to grow *together*. We need help in our growing, and changing, and becoming. The clients on *What Not to Wear* sure don't make their transformations on their own. They have supportive hosts at their side who teach them, and tell them hard truths, and encourage them and help them through the transformation process, and this is what Christians do for each other. Our Christian friends encourage us to keep going. They teach us things that we didn't know or understand before. They pray for us and hold us accountable. They give us opportunities to practice things like patience, and kindness, and forgiveness so that we can get better at them. Together they form a community that exemplifies the new normal that Christ calls us to embrace so that even if we feel at odds with others around us or like we are "weird" in some way, we at least have a group of people around us that can be weird with us!

In our passage, Paul encourages the Colossians to stay connected to each other. He includes "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom" in his list of things that will help them in their transformation process. This is a theme that comes up over and over in Paul's letters as he talks about gifts of the Spirit and using them so that the whole Body of Christ can be built up. In Ephesians 4:11-16 it says, "**The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,** ¹² **to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,** ¹³ **until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the**

Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. It's clear that the reason that we have gifts is to use them to help each other become more like Jesus and to help each other stay on the path of discipleship that is filled with temptations and opportunities to veer off the path.

We have established two things so far. First, that we are meant to grow and change as we follow Christ. As the saying goes, "Jesus accepts us just as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us that way." And the second thing we've affirmed is that we need others to help us with the changing, and they need us. There is a final third thing that should be added to these first two, and that is that we need to be intentional about developing relationships that can have this kind of influence in our lives. It is helpful to show up for worship on Sunday and to be surrounded by other believers. That does great things for our faith and growth, but there is something more that happens when we intentionally gather with others for deeper sharing, and to wrestle with and discuss Scripture, and to pray with and for each other. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, knew how essential this type of group meeting was to the growth of believers which is why he created a system of organizing people into classes and bands so that together with each other and with the Holy Spirit they could check in with each other and support each other as each member pursued spiritual maturity. This is why churches, and this church, offer opportunities for classes and small groups. Making a commitment to participating in that kind of group is so essential.

In this past year, it has been challenging to meet together in groups of course, but I am encouraged by the fact that all of our group gatherings haven't completely gone out the window. The Grace Patrol Sunday school class continues to meet. There was a Ruth Bible study, and our children and youth have meet together on Zoom at different times. As we move forward through Covid, we will continue to be creative and offer these opportunities. We do need each other because together we grow.

As we prepare ourselves now to gather at our Lord's table, we find encouragement there for our transformation process. There may be some pieces of that old wardrobe that are so difficult to let go of, and likewise, there may be pieces of the new wardrobe that still feel a little uncomfortable and uneasy to us. As we gather at the table together, we see with our eyes the truth that we are not alone, and at his table, Jesus confirms that he is with us, and working in us, and he will complete the transformation in us that he has begun. Amen.