

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 11, 2022

Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, 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. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 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. 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.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

You know we determined that we were going to be doing this worship series months ago. And so this question of why has been rolling around in my head for months throughout the summer in preparation for these next six or seven weeks together--this question of why. Why is it that we do what we do? And I was completely ready to go whole hog into that question for the church, and then why started being asked in a different way in our community over the last few weeks.

Why her? Why now? Why would somebody perpetrate such violence? Why would somebody drive around our city? Why would God allow something like this to happen? And then how are we to make sense of it all?

The question of why has taken on a different significance for us, and it seems to me that this morning this question of why we worship actually becomes a pretty pivotal one. Why are we gathered in this space together, this sacred space together, after the events of the last few weeks?

You know this text from Colossians has been picked out for a while too, and so I wondered what it was people might have been asking, the people to which Paul authored this letter, or the epistle writer authored this letter.

So, it turns out that the people who lived in this city were people who lived in a...we call it a medium metropolitan area. It had a good bit of commerce in it. It was a place through which many goods and services moved. There was a river beside it. Actually, the river, interestingly enough, flowed beside it and then kind of disappeared for a while and then reappeared farther down the stream. It's an interesting phenomenon. It turns out also that the Colossians, they received this letter sometime in the midst of perhaps the most traumatic event in their community's life together.

If it wasn't the most traumatic, it was the most traumatic one that happened in decades. See Paul wrote this letter, or the author of the epistle wrote this letter, between 60 and 62 A.D. And

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historians tell us that sometime around that same time, the city that the Colossians called home was leveled by an earthquake. This city, where so many people were bound together, so much commerce, so many lives intertwined, literally was shaken apart. And so, we're not exactly sure when the Colossians began to read this letter; but we might imagine ourselves, if we were they, reading this epistle when their lives had been torn apart, their sense of community had been stolen from them, their sense of safety and security taken in an instant or in an evening.

And so Paul writes the Colossians. And he's writing, and we actually don't know that he knows that their city has been devastated, but it turns out the spirit works anyway. So he goes into all sorts of different things, different encouragements. Then we get to this third chapter in this epistle, and then he begins to speak about something that seems maybe foreign to us. "Therefore as God's chosen one's, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." And I imagine if I were one of the Colossians that day, I would have said, "Thanks a lot, Paul. It's not really what I need to hear right now. Compassion isn't really the first thing on my mind. Patience is not in large supply."

He goes on from there, and we'll get to that in a second. But it turns out that each of the communities to which Paul wrote needed encouragement in different ways. To the Hebrews he would say, "Hold fast to the confession of your hope without wavering, for Christ has promised and Christ is faithful; and not only that, consider how you might provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet with each other as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching."

Paul has this way of encouraging the church in the midst of their most desperate hour, and not just the church but entire communities that would be reading these Epistles together.

Over the last few weeks, we have asked the question why so many times. And this morning as we remember the events of the last few weeks, and also as we look back on the events of 9/11 a few decades ago, it seems appropriate for us to ask that again—why?

I was in the Springs Campus Center at Presbyterian College on the morning of September 11th. I grabbed a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich--those were new at PC. They didn't make their way there for a long time; I grabbed one of those and a Dr. Pepper. There was this big tube TV that I walked in front of, and the first plane had hit the first tower. We were standing there watching it, paused frozen in awe of what was transpiring, not really knowing actually what was transpiring, not...not really knowing the way in which our world was being shaken even in that moment. And then the second plane hit.

And before I knew it there were 30 people surrounding this television, this big screen in the Campus Center in Clinton, South Carolina. We stood there, and then we ran back to our dorms where our phones resided, and we made calls to our parents and our loved ones. And then the towers collapsed, and our world was shaken once again.

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And then just 10 days ago, reeling as our world has been shaken here in Memphis.

Can you imagine reading this epistle after your world has been shaken? I think you can--from the events of Wednesday evening, to the death of Liza Fletcher, to the death of Artura Eason Williams, our community has seen its foundation shaken. And so it seems to me an appropriate question to ask why. Why worship?

It's a different intonation than I had a few weeks ago, but why worship, why gather in this place? I can only share with you a few personal insights from this place, but when I've asked myself the question of why I decide to worship, it's not just because I'm called to this or was ordained into this work, it's actually something completely different. Because we could be pastors in any other sort of way that we wanted to be, but to be centered in worship, to be centered in the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ, is for me decentering. And that is to say that as I move through the world, I am the center of my own universe. My thoughts, my words, my reflections, they are closer to me than anything else. You might think and believe something, but you need to communicate it to me, and likewise I to you. Even your children must communicate to you what it is they think or feel at a given moment. And we are indeed centers of our own universe. Or at least we believe we are until we come into a place that moves us from the center so that the one that we worship takes center stage.

And so for me worship provides a weekly reminder that I am not the center of it all. It forces me to acknowledge that there is a power outside of myself, outside of ourselves; and it invites me, worship does, to fall into that power in love, and with grace, to be received in mercy, and to be given hope.

And it turns out that we are only here to worship this day because on one gloomy Sunday morning a few millennia ago, some women got up early; and despite their grief or maybe because of it, they clothed themselves with compassion. And they made their way to a garden with some healing balm. They were looking for their murdered friend, but they did not find him there. Instead, they found an empty tomb where death used to be. We are only here to worship because Resurrection happened.

Because against all odds, light overcame darkness, life overcame death. And it turns out that in the midst of all the trivial things of our world, that news like that is worth celebrating.

It's worth remembering. It's worth marking.

So Paul's on to something when he tells the Hebrews "Don't stop gathering together." Some other people are going to stop gathering together; don't stop gathering together. Support each other, encourage each other, and "hold fast for the confession of your hope with out wavering." I'm not saying you don't want to waiver. I'm not saying you won't feel like wavering, but I am telling you that the one who promised you is faithful. Provoke one another. Beyond that, don't just gather together, provoke one another to love and good deeds. Don't neglect to meet together. Encourage one another, and do it all the more in the most difficult of times.

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And then later to the Colossians--

“Chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another, and above all clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” We worship because our faith tells us that no matter how dark it gets, there's always hope, always new life, always Resurrection. Our faith doesn't gloss over the pain and the hurt and the sadness. Our faith simply tells us that with all, with some chemistry of grace and time, those emotions, those emotions of hurt and pain and grief and sadness can somehow inextricably be transformed into something new. Our faith says all of those things are real. You can feel them. You should experience them; but then at some point whenever it is you feel led, get up and clothe yourself with compassion. Clothe yourself with compassion until everyone feels seen.

Clothe yourself with humility; clothe yourself with humility until no one feels lesser than. Clothe yourself with patience, because the road of healing is a long hard road. The road of transformation is a long hard road. The road of addressing generational trauma is a long hard road. You have to be patient. And for God, for God's sake, bear with one another, because if you can't do it, how do you expect the world to believe that it's possible?

I was thinking about the passage this week and what it looks like in practice to believe that it is actually possible. Perhaps it looks like getting up at 3am and lighting a candle in the darkness. Perhaps it looks like crying and putting on your running shoes and making your way down Central, stopping to catch your breath, and then running some more.

Maybe stopping a few miles from here and joining with other people who are defiant of the darkness and lighting a candle and singing a song and maybe inching closer to the one right beside you. Then you clean yourself up and you get home, and you wrap yourself in love, and then you go out into the world, because it turns out that there's simply no other binding agent that can bring about harmony. It might feel like a shaky harmony because it probably is, but what made you think that harmony isn't a delicate flower that needs tending and protecting. And maybe it means being reminded that you can't do this on your own. Know that the word of Christ actually has to dwell in you richly, and you need to gather together and be reminded of that, perhaps every week.

Beloved, we worship because we dare to believe that the same power that was at work in the garden that morning for those women, that same power that was at work when a city had been decimated for the Colossians, that same power is at work here and now, and that same power can cultivate within our souls hope. It might not be time for that yet for you. There's no hurry to get there. You're supposed to have patience as well. The road is long.

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But what I can tell you this day, what Paul knew unequivocally, and what Christ promised is that there is hope, and it is authored by the one who created each and every single one of us.

Paul knew it. Christ knew it, and I think Nouwen speaks to it, in some words attributed to a student of his, when he writes that “hope means to keep living amid desperation, to keep humming in the darkness. Hope is knowing that there is love. It is trust in tomorrow; it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises. In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land. In the eyes of another, it is to see that you are understood.”

We gather because the resurrection gives us hope. We need reminders of it from each other. We can't bear this burden alone.

So I want you to imagine this day this letter that Paul penned to the Colossians. I want you to imagine that this letter was actually written to our community. I want you to imagine that there was a city by a river that has been shaken. I want you to imagine that there are parts of it that have fallen away and feel like they can never be bound together again.

“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another. And if anyone has a complaint against you, forgive each other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. But above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the Peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were indeed called in one body.” And even in the midst of the suffering and the brokenness, find a way to “be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts, sing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God. 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.”

In the name of the Father and the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.

Amen