

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

December 27, 2015

Colossians 3:12-17

"Clothed in Love"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

After hearing the second lesson this morning, from Colossians, it's easy to see why it's often read at weddings. I've probably done at least 20 weddings where this text was one of the scriptures read. So I'll have to be careful that today's sermon doesn't sound like a wedding sermon! ☺

There is so much rich material in this brief passage, that it's impossible to cover it all in one sermon, so I'll just lift up some of what I see as the main points.

Paul's advice in this letter is not actually advice directed to couples. Rather, it's advice to all Christians living in the community we call a congregation, on how to live together in harmony. Let's listen again with that in mind:

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 also must 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 the one body.

And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...

When we see what Paul emphasizes in this letter to the church that he had founded in Colossae, we sense that there was probably some conflict, some lack of peaceful harmony in that congregation that Paul was concerned about.

Imagine that! A congregation where not everyone was happy all the time – a church where there were sometimes complaints and disagreements. And the Bible – the inspired word of God – doesn't hide this but comes right out and talks about it publicly.

All of us Christians should give thanks for the honesty of the Bible on this issue. Because it can keep us from feeling despair when our own congregation isn't perfect.

You see, every church, in every age, has had disagreements, and times when not everyone was happy with things. That's because the church is not a club for perfect people. Rather, it's a gathering of sinners – broken people.

As long as we are living on this side of heaven, there is no perfect congregation.

I love what ELCA pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says in her latest book, *Accidental Saints*:

"It's my practice to welcome new people to the church by making sure they know that House for All Sinners and Saints will, at some point, let them down. That I will say or do something stupid and

disappoint them. And then I encourage them to decide before that happens if they will stick around after it happens. If they leave, I tell them, they will miss the way that God's grace comes in and fills in the cracks left behind by our brokenness. And that's too beautiful to miss."

I'm nowhere near as eloquent as Nadia, but I usually say something similar to visitors who are "church-shopping".

I tell them, if they're looking for a perfect church, they probably should keep looking.

But I also remind them that there aren't any perfect churches, and we think we are pretty good at welcoming all sinners to come and experience the love and Grace of God.

So I tell them, I hope they'll come back. And many of them do.

What can we learn from Paul's advice to the Christians in Colossae? Let's look.

First of all, look how he addresses them, and us, by extension: "*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,*" he says.

Can this be true? Can you and I really be God's chosen ones? That's quite an amazing thought, don't you think?

I'm sure phy ed teachers nowadays are much too intelligent to still use this method, but when I was in Jr. High, whenever we were going to play a game we used to divide the class into teams by having the teacher pick two captains who would take turns choosing their team members.

Now, any of you who have watched me play church softball will be shocked to hear this, but, back then, I wasn't considered one of the best athletes in my class.

And I remember more than once holding my breath and fervently hoping (maybe even praying?) that I wouldn't be one of the last ones chosen.

It's awful to think we might not be chosen for something. And think how much worse it is if we're afraid we aren't chosen by God!

But Paul tells you **that's exactly what you are: chosen.** "*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...*" he says to you.

The same **message of grace and assurance** is found in a Bible verse I make my 9th graders memorize in confirmation (yes, I know, hard to believe anyone requires memory work anymore!) The verse is John 15:16, where Jesus says, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*"

So yes, as Paul says, we are all “*God’s chosen ones.*” And we are even, get this, “*holy and beloved.*” That’s what God calls us.

We are holy not because of anything we have done, but because God has declared us to be holy. He can call us holy because of the death of Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to give us practical advice, telling us how we, as Christians, are to get along with one another.

“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 also must forgive.”

Now, let me share something I’ve observed over many years of doing wedding rehearsals and weddings.

I always enjoy seeing the change between all of the young people in the wedding party between the Friday night rehearsal and the Saturday wedding itself.

Their clothing is as different from Friday to Saturday as night and day.

On Friday evening, they’re all dressed casually, but on Saturday, suddenly the girls are wearing beautiful dresses, and the guys are looking sharp in tuxedos.

And what I’ve noticed, almost every time, is that their demeanor, their behavior, also changes drastically. It’s almost as if putting on elegant clothes makes everyone act just a little more elegantly.

I often think of that when I hear Paul’s advice to “*clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience..... And, above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

Think about this phrase, “*clothe yourselves*”. If we think about it, clothing isn’t something we can manufacture from inside ourselves just by using will-power and our own efforts.

Clothing is something that’s not naturally within us, but rather something from outside that we put on.

And the love, the compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience that Paul speaks of here is, just like clothing, something which comes from outside of you, and which you can put on like a garment.

The love that we are to clothe ourselves with is not our love. It’s **God’s love for us.**

On the day we were baptized, God clothed each of us with the garment of Christ’s love. How would our lives look if we lived as if that were true?

How would we behave if we remembered that we are clothed in the love of Jesus?

I think, just like happens with those groomsmen and bridesmaids, we just might find ourselves transformed.

If we remembered that we're clothed in the love of Jesus, we might discover that we are living with more compassion, kindness, and patience.

Finally, I think it's **significant that Paul uses the image of harmony**. "*Clothe yourselves with love,*" he says, "*which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*"

If we think of harmony, it comes from **combining two or more notes that are different**. Within this congregation, we have such a broad variety of people, with different gifts, different politics, different likes and dislikes, and various interests. And that's a good thing.

Because **we can't have harmony if all the notes are exactly the same**. Harmony comes **because the notes are different**.

Our differences as people can enrich our congregation and our life together.

Of course, **our differences can sometimes lead to dissonance**. There's no question about that.

But that's where the love of Christ, with which we are all clothed, can **take those differences and bind them together to make perfect harmony**.

When that happens, then the peace of Christ will rule in our hearts, and we will be able to shine with the love and light of Christ in our community.

SO LET'S REMEMBER HOW WE'RE DRESSED.

WE ARE ALL CLOTHED IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

Let's live as if it's true. Amen.