

## **“Is There Anything Different about Us”**

**Colossians 3:1–17**

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In his book *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* Walter Brueggemann says there are two reasons we have struggled to pass along the faith in churches like ours. First, we have become inarticulate about faith, and second, we have failed to live in a way that convinces even our own children that there is something different about us because we are Christian.

I have addressed the first concern numerous times and will again in the future. The fact that we find the language some use to share faith with others inadequate or offensive does not mean that we should not talk about faith at all. But I want to address the second concern today. Is there anything different about us because of our faith?

When I asked this question in another setting, a woman there said, “Christians are the people who let you out in traffic.” Well, if she was right, there aren’t many Christians in Raleigh. And if I am honest, I must say that I do not always get a passing grade according to this measure of faith. The old Southern perspective about Christian faith was, “Don’t drink, smoke or chew or go with those who do.” But while there are some health concerns involved, prohibitions against such things, along with dancing and card playing, are values of Southern Culture, not Christian faith. So, is there anything different about us?

The author of Colossians seems to think so. In our reading today, he says that if we have been raised with Christ, we should seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. We should set our minds on things that are above. It sounds like he has something specific in mind, a different way of living and being, and in the verses that follow, he elaborates on these, naming some things we should not do, and some we should. Seeking something different in these ways will help us pass along our faith and offer the world something it needs desperately — a better way.

In the first part of our reading, the author provides a couple of lists of behavior to avoid. The first, he says, includes anything earthly — fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed, which he says is idolatry. Before dealing with the specifics, it is important to note that “earthly” things are not necessarily physical things. This is not a rejection of the physical, which God created, in favor of the spiritual. “Earthly” means of this world as opposed to being part of God’s realm.

So, to jump to the last thing first, our culture does not frown on us for being greedy. In fact, it depends on it. Capitalism depends on a hunger for acquisition. But our faith places some limits on how much we accumulate, and even more so, how much we desire. In his book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* Henry Fairlie says that avarice is not so much the love of possessions but the love of possessing (p. 135).

There is nothing wrong with making a living and enjoying the benefits of hard work. But it is easy for our desire for more to become the central motivating factor in our lives, the first priority, which means that no matter what we think we believe about God, acquisition has become our god. Thus, the author says, greed is idolatry.

On a practical level, greed is never fulfilling, because we can never have enough. Several years ago, Ali brought back from Greece a cup of Pythagoras which sits on my desk. It is designed to hold water, wine or any liquid, and you can fill it up to a line and it will hold the liquid. But if you put in too much, fill it over the line, all of the liquid will pour out.

It is fascinating, but the point is — life is this way. There is such a thing as enough, but too much inevitably takes the joy out of everything, and it contributes to injustice. A great saint once said that our calling is to love people and use things, but we have chosen to love things and use people. Never has this been truer than it is today, but not for those who have been raised with Christ and seek the things that are above.

The other things in this first list all seem to pertain to sexuality, and after money, it is the most critical and sensitive subject. But the author is not naming this part of life or desire itself as evil. It is a part of God’s good gift of creation to be experienced with joy — just responsibly and in the context of deeply committed love. It’s not an

arbitrary rule designed to satisfy a demanding deity. It's the way we are made.

The literary character Don Juan is always searching for something missing because his efforts at seduction never lead to the deep kind of connection with another human being that is fulfilling. English novelist Angus Wilson once said that envy can never lead to joy because its appetite never ceases. Its result is endless torment. It has the ugliness of a trapped rat that has gnawed its own feet in an effort to escape. Such is the result of lust. It is never fulfilling. It is always self-defeating. This is not a prudish or Puritan perspective. It's a real-life perspective. Sadly, many people are looking for love in all the wrong places...

In Dante's *Paradise*, when the protagonist climbs the last step of the ladder of the Blessed Mountain, Virgil sends him forward to proceed on his own, saying, "Make pleasure now thy guide." Pleasure is not the enemy. The misuse of pleasure — to exploit, control, manipulate, and address only one's own needs — is.

The second list of things to avoid includes anger, wrath and malice, and then slander, abusive language and lying. It is not a pretty list, but if we can avoid these things, we will present to our children and the world around us evidence that we are different.

To address the first set of concerns, there is nothing wrong with anger. It is a human emotion, a natural reaction to something that threatens us. But wrath and malice involve holding on to anger, nursing it, and using it to get back at someone. There is a more Christlike way of dealing with conflict. It begins with letting go of anger.

In the minutes of the Long Run Baptist Association in Louisville, Kentucky there is a record of an address given by a professor at Southern Seminary in the first half of the twentieth century in which he apologizes for becoming angry at a previous meeting, so angry that he jumped off of the dais and landed over the first pew. He also says he hopes and prays that no one does anything to make him that angry again... At least he didn't nurse his anger, and for the record, what angered him was that another professor was being attacked unfairly.

Letting go of wrath and malice is not only good for the other person; it is good for us. Harboring anger is self-destructive, it gives others more power over us, but letting go of it is not the norm in this day of road rage, shouting at public meetings, one shooting after another, and often over silly things.

How many shootings have there been over parking spaces alone, for goodness sakes, or someone thinking he was cut off in traffic? And often it is someone who claims to be a Christian. I think of the man who passed a pick-up truck with a bumper sticker that read, “Honk If You Love Jesus!” So he honked, whereupon the man who drove the truck, apparently forgetting about his bumper sticker, promptly extended his middle finger. That is what Colossians counsels us not to do.

The second grouping of concerns has to do with the use of words — to be vulgar, to slander others, and to lie. The book of James says the tongue is a fire (James 3:6). How well we know. Someone said that whoever said, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” must have lived in a world of deaf mutes. Words can keep people on their feet or tear them apart. And dishonesty, fundamental dishonesty, is not only destructive to people and society; it has become so commonplace that people don’t even blush at it.

The internet has not helped us. Misinformation and outright lies, whether about our next-door neighbor or the alleged stealing of an election, spread like wildfire, destroying everything in sight. We don’t have to be the teller of the lie to be part of the problem. All we have to do is pass it on. The United Methodist Church is dealing with this insidious demon right now as those who are unhappy with the church becoming more open to LGBT people have spread misinformation about the church planning to eliminate or change its beliefs about the Trinity and the resurrection of Jesus. It is simply not true.

There is a simple solution for this problem. Speak the truth, and don’t pass along anything until we have verified its truthfulness and considered the consequences of sharing it. Will doing so do harm or good? If we are disciplined in our communication, we will be different.

This is where the lectionary reading ends, with verse eleven, with the naming of behavior we will do away with if we set our minds on things that are above. But it seems critical that we identify the things we do too, the behavior we take on, which is why we have read through verse seventeen. These latter verses elaborate on the qualities and behaviors we seek. They begin with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Christians are not the only ones who pursue such things, but they lie at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, and they apply to how we relate to everyone.

But then, the author names something more distinctively Christian. We should bear with one another, and if one has a complaint against another, we should forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven us. That is the next step in dealing with conflict. We let go of anger, and then we forgive, as we have been forgiven. But do we?

I don't know how many family disputes, business partner feuds, neighbor quarrels, even church member conflicts I have seen end not in forgiveness but anger, wrath, and malice. "Not after what he did!" we say, thus proving to our children and anyone else who wants to see that we are no different than the world around us. Some hurt is difficult to forgive, but we have all been on the hurting end of things. Can we bring ourselves to forgive?

The key lies in the last bit of counsel the author gives us — clothe yourselves with love, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Where do we find the ability to be different, the capacity to forgive? Deep within ourselves — if we allow the Spirit of Christ to rule in our hearts, the teachings of Christ to shape our lives, the love of Christ to guide us.

I have shared with some of you the story of a dear friend in another setting who became angry with me after his son died suddenly at the age of forty. The son and I were the same age, and I was still alive, but more importantly, he was angry with God, but couldn't get to God. As a representative of God, I was the logical focus of his grief-driven rage.

But after a time, he let go of that rage. He was a former minister, a deeply committed follower of Christ. And I let go of any frustration I might have felt. Cued by an interaction during communion, when I

simply put my arm gently on his shoulder, as we shared the bread and the cup, we forgave each other through tears, embraced and formed a deep bond for the rest of his life. I could not replace the son he lost, but I was the recipient of the love that would have been that son's.

Does that kind of forgiveness occur outside of our faith? Perhaps, with some other faith, but rarely and almost never without Divine aid. If we want to model a different way, for our children and the world, this is how we do it — through love and forgiveness.

I think of a conversation between a dying, agnostic journalist and his minister friend trying to convert him on his deathbed. When the minister finally came up for air, the journalist said, “Are you talking about life lived according to the teachings of Jesus? I'm all for it! When does it begin?”

There is a world full of people waiting for it to begin. We know what to let go of and what to take on; all that remains is to choose this path, to set our minds on things above.