

“Setting Our Hearts and Minds on Things Above”

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-17

Victoria First Church – Sunday, April 7, 2024

Here we are – the first Sunday after what is so clearly the highlight and pivotal event of our faith as Christians. What Pastor Dave has aptly referred to as the “Resurrection Zone” and all those remarkable events leading up to Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And what a wonderful celebration that was last week – the music, the message – and that inspiring word from the kids.

But it’s over now ... and here we are on ‘low Sunday’ ... you might remember Ron Corcoran preaching on this date two years ago telling us how as a young student he was offered the opportunity to preach on the Sunday following Easter and having it referred to as ‘low Sunday’ – so he dutifully went searching all through the liturgical and lectionary documents trying to determine what its significance meant. Only to finally discover that it simply referred to the fact that a great deal of people attend the Easter Sunday service – not so much the Sunday after.

It not ought to be that life after Easter and the resurrection is anti-climactic. Know this, the victory – the hope – the promise of resurrection is that the truth of this event influences, impacts and vitalizes everything about what it means to be a follower of Christ.

For the apostle Paul the empty tomb opens up for believers a life of immense possibilities.

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‘Resurrection’ living is not just a belief in the power and importance of Christ’s resurrection – but that living within the power of this resurrection allows us to claim that potential as our own.

This morning I want to draw our thought to this through the passage from Colossians that was read earlier. The Church in Colossae was made up of believers who sought to live out their new found faith in Christ but were surrounded by a host of mixed messages about just how to do that. Some teachers came and insisted that there were set rules and regulations that were required if they truly desired to be Christian, and that if they were looking for a way to live a moral life – following these dictates would do it for them.

Paul comes fresh from writing his letter to the Ephesians and wants to let them know that as good as regulations, rituals and routines were, they were not going to change you and make you a truly holy person – only Jesus could do that.

Paul addresses this by stressing understanding right doctrine in the first part of the letter – now he was to begin to tell them how to live this out.

Wholeness in our life and faith comes by discovering the fullness of Christ - by Setting Our Hearts and Minds on Things Above”

I. It’s about what you Desire: (vs. 1-4)

You can’t get it much plainer and down to earth than what Paul says here in vs. 1-4.

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Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Set your hearts ... set your minds. Fill your thinking on Jesus rather than the other things that threaten to crowd into your life. The literal translation here is “*keep on seeking – thinking*” ... make it a habit.

The Colossians, you see, lived in a day and an age that taught them nothing about what it meant to live a moral life. You went to a temple someplace – bowed down to an idol – left a small offering of some sort – and then went right back into your sinful life. If they are going to live righteous and upright lives they are going to have to get their mind off the old things of their life – and onto the better things.

Now understand this – these people were believers - they have clearly been brought into Christ’s kingdom – that have been “raised with Christ” ... back in chapter 1:13 Paul declares:

¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption,^[a] the forgiveness of sins..

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And he continues to remind them of that throughout these verses. But he wants more for them – he knows that they have the desire – and that is why they had so easily bought into false teaching.

Audrey and I have been impressed with the beauty of diversity that we have found here in the church. There are a wide range of stories and backgrounds among those who attend here. And I am not sure what the correct collective pronoun is – but there is a mess of preacher who attend here! 200 years ago there was an incredible movement of the Spirit in North America and beyond. It was before the days of modern travel and communication – yet from east to west, north to south – there were small pockets of groups of people who were seeking for something more in their Christian faith. Peculating up from the discontent came numerous church movements – The Christian Missionary Alliance; the Salvation Army; The Church of God Anderson, and Cleveland; Pentecostal Assemblies; The Wesleyan Church; Free Methodist to name just a few – and The Church of the Nazarene. To read the history of that time is to get a sense of a great and collective desire for something more in faith and Mission. It was called ‘the Holiness movement’.

So to with these Colossian believers. They had desire – but also old habits to address and deal with. Paul is saying – “If you want to get this life right – the way it was intended to be – then you need to change your perspective and set your hearts and minds on Christ”.

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When we received Christ as our saviour – we also came into a life calling us to live holy lives. (Eph. 1:4)

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

So Paul calls them here to set their hearts and minds on things above – not the earthly things that we put away from our life. He in a sense calls them to what A.B. Simpson referred to as “A Larger Christian Life” - to “become what you are” ... he needs them to realize who they are in Christ. To be like Christ.

The Old Testament Hebrew word for “holy” when used in reference to God’s people was the ‘qodash’ – which literally means “belonging to God”. To be set aside for his use and purpose. Holiness is a journey with the one to whom we daily give our first love and loyalty. And it is this to which Paul is now calling them to understand. The term for that is ‘sanctification’ – and lest you think that is just a Nazarene thing – one of my favorite Presbyterian preacher, Lloyd John Ogilvie, states it this way:

“Sanctification is the process of becoming distinctly different. It is the miracle of a character transformation in which we become more and more like Christ.”

(Life As It was meant to be ... pg. 73)

There is a paradox to this message that is evident here in what Paul says in Colossians and elsewhere. *“On the one hand, sanctification is an act of God, obtained by faith on the basis of what Jesus did for us.*

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On the other hand, it is something we are called to enter into, preserve, and continue to live in by our own choice.”

(Terance Paige – chp 3 *Be Holy*).

Illustrate it this way: Those of you who are parents here will understand that on the day that child was born – both husband and wife became parents. It’s just a biological fact. That biological fact of birth does not determine what kind of parent we are going to be. Good parents are looking and seeking for ways to continually fulfill their God given responsibility to raise their children right. It’s about what you desire and choose.

So too with our Christian walk. We are born into this holy kingdom through the death and resurrection of Christ on our behalf – but that is not the end of the story. We have to desire more. We have to believe that we are going somewhere, becoming something. We are called to a life of **wholeness** – for that is what holiness is.

II. It’s about Dedication: (vs. 5-11)

The end and goal of every good disciple is to be like their master – for us it is to be like Jesus. And ‘holiness’ or ‘sanctification’ is best understood as “Christlikeness”. That is why I so appreciate the simplicity of our denominational Mission statement:

To make Christlike Disciples in the Nations.”

The word for ‘disciple’ is the same root word for ‘discipline’ ... and they are clearly related. Becoming a disciple requires a measure of discipline to master Christlike life.

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The 'Desire' I mentioned in my first point – produces the inner determination and dedication to do what we need to fulfil our calling to be holy people. Wesley would often refer to this as “singleness of eye – that is, to be obedient to the law of Christ.”

Paul calls these believers – and all others – to recognize the importance of dedicating ourselves in our followership of Christ and to let that be the dominant thing. Consider what he says to them here, and he uses stark, dramatic words: He uses the term 'died' to bring forth the point that discipleship means disciplining ourselves to put to death those things will pull us down while we continue to live in this fragile human body. In verse 7 we are instructed to get rid of those things to which we have died – literally to 'throw them out'!

Illus. When Audrey and I were at college in Winnipeg we lived in a little one-bedroom suite in the main campus building. The campus was pretty much out in the country on its own –and it wasn't uncommon for us to have the occasional mouse find its way into our cozy warm little home. Now mice and Audrey do not make a good combination. I mean I am not fond of them either – but she used to keep a mouse trap in her purse! The Fact is that she did a lot of camp work before we met and if she knew there was a mouse around running free in some of those old camp cabins she would not sleep – could not sleep until she had set the trap. So you get the picture.

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Well, I finally got it out of the house – but have to confess to you that I had to kill it to do so. Now what do you think I did with that dead mouse?

- Put it on a shelf with all the other dead or lifeless things we had on display so that I could tell people who came in about the hunt? NO
- Stick it in a Tupperware container and put it in the fridge to keep the body fresh? NO
- Hang it from a string on the rear view mirror of our car as a trophy? Absolutely not.

You know what I did. I threw it out – and didn't give it a second thought. I hadn't wanted it in my home when it was alive – I certainly didn't want it there when it was dead. Paul say ... rid yourself of all those things you died to!

In verse 9 Paul uses the expression 'put on' and 'take off' which would have been 'catch phrases' for these early believers, it's the language and image of their baptism when they would have come in new, clean clothes – having discarded their old clothes which were symbols of their past sinful life. When they received Christ they replaced their old way of life for something new, clean, and pure.

And in the midst of this – don't lose sight of the fact that the reason behind all of these actions which seem so restrictive

Its about Desire ... Dedication

III. It's about doing things Differently: (vs. 12-13)
Christian Holiness is not just about abstaining from everything bad – but perfectly loving as God loves. Become what you are – holy and beloved people of God.

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If you study the lists of sins that we are to have died to compared to the list of behaviours that mark the walk of holy and beloved people of God you will see that the list of sinful behaviours are centered on self: *sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed - anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language.*

The list found next, however, is all oriented outward away from one's self – and towards others:

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

If we will be holy people of God a time must come in our life and our spiritual journey when we make a clear and conscious shift from a self oriented life – to one that is centered on Christ. And when we do that – we will have a lifestyle that flows from us that reflects his best qualities.

One of our great theologians, Myldred Bangs Wynkoop summarized it this way:

“... but as love cannot mature without expression, so holiness, which is love, cannot exist apart from the life expression of it.” (Wynkoop, p. 118 *A Wesleyan View*).

Its about doing things differently

IV. It's about Dependency:

Living a Christlike life is Personal – but it is not individual. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit – but if we learn anything from Acts and the accounts of the New Testament, we will need help to live holy lives.

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Throughout my preparation for this message I have thought often of how much this holy relationship is like marriage. The statement I just made (from Mildred Wynkoop by the way) is so very true. Love cannot mature without expression. Consider just a few comparisons:

There is an ‘already’ and a ‘not yet’ element to married life. By that I mean that leading up to the wedding date is the courtship – the discovery of love for the other person. It is a pretty all-consuming feeling and emotion during that time. It is not at all something that you could call ‘static’ ... that is, unmoving. And then a time comes when we have an ‘event’ called a wedding. On the day that Audrey and I got married I went from being her fiancé to being her husband. We went from just good intentions – to a legal status as Mr. and Mrs Dahl, in the eyes of the Province of Alberta – and in the eyes of the Church – and in the eyes of all the witnesses who were there to see this (I think some came just to find out if it was really true) – we were married.

But it would be a foolish person to think that we are, by that legal act, done and finished. How silly would it have been for me to have said to Audrey at the reception “Listen honey, since two of my best friends travelled here just for this event, we thought we would take a couple of days and go fishing. Can you get somebody to give you a ride to the house? Foolish – that would be a death warrant! But, of course, that wouldn't be how it would happen. I like my friends – but I loved my wife. This is a relationship founded on love – so our Desire is to be with each other.

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The wedding was great – but that was not the end of the story – just the beginning.

But we also recognize, don't we, that good relationships require a certain measure of Dedication – a determination to make things work.

I often told couples I was doing pre-marriage counselling with that “marriage is death” ... by that I mean that you are not very long into marriage when you discover that you don't always think and feel the same. One of you may like the window open at night – the other wants it closed. Short of sleeping in separate rooms – someone's right is going to have to die! If you're married you likely could give me some examples!

When you get married – you are at that time – set apart – separated in some measure from others. We generally have a line in the Marriage vows that says: “*And forsaking all others I will true to you alone.*” Guess what – that means you are now separated from all the other masses of people who are attracted to you – or to whom you are attracted. But we don't see that as a negative thing – but as a positive statement of value and an ongoing affirmation of our dedication to the marriage and the person.

I am also aware that good marriages – ones that last and that provide a good model – have spent a life time making changes for the goodness and health of the relationship. We do things differently.

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Audrey and I both took training in the Taylor Johnson Temperament Analysis ... what an interesting thing to find out how different we really are. It was actually helpful to have it charted out on a piece of paper – I recall her seeing it and saying: “So you really like that – your not just doing those things to irritate me!”

She is active-social ... enjoys going to events, programs, plays. I am on the other end of the scale – not ‘anti-social’ ... they call it ‘quiet’ – it means that given the choice I would rather stay at home. So there are times when I will go with her to events that are of interest to her – she will, at other times, go with a friend or even by herself.

I am impulsive – she is self disciplined. - I discovered the need to manage my time better rather than frustrating her with my too casual approach to things and I was late a lot. And in making those changes for the relationship I have become not only a better husband – but a better leader and administrator in the other areas of my life. We do things differently because we love one another. And I have confess that even after 51 years of marriage – I am still finding that I still don't always get it right! I am better than I was – but ‘not yet’ where I want to be.

Its about Dependency - we need help in living holy lives – the reality is that none of us are good enough to do it on our own:

- a. **I will need God's help** Throughout his letter to the Colossians, Paul emphasizes the powerful role of the Trinity in all that shapes and makes us.

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Just as God did a work *for us* in reconciling us to Him through Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit ... so He does a work *in us* with the objective of effecting our sanctification. Time and again this good Word reminds us that God is at work for our behalf and His kingdom's glory.

b. I need His word in my life (vs. 16) *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”*

We are back, in a way, where we started *“Set your hearts and minds on things above.”* Again, Wesley stated that the character of a Methodist is one who embraces this truth: *“We believe the written word of God to be the only sufficient rule of both Christian faith and practice.”*

The beauty of holiness rightly understood is that it is best understood and described as a relationship.

c. I need a Holy Community: (vs. 15b) *“As members of one body you were called to peace.”*

Pastor Dave referenced this last Sunday when he talked about the restorative aspect of this church. The Church of Christ has always been – and must continue to be – a divine community of people called to model life as it is meant to be lived. We need this. Places to guide, train, equip, correct and lead one another. I like the way Eugene Pederson says it in *The Message*:

¹⁵⁻¹⁷Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing.

(Call Worship Team up)

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In light of all of that it is appropriate that we come to this point in our service when we prepare to share together at the Lord's table. Communion – that which we hold in common one with another. I have mentioned the wonder of diversity of this particular congregation ... but the beauty of celebrating around those great essential truths that we hold in common.

The Trinity is our model – God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work in a harmony and symmetry in which

there is no competition –

but unity and purpose in working together for the purpose of restoring creation to its original form and design. God is in this – and if we will seek to be distinguished by full desire to be like Christ – you can be assured that all of God is on side with you on this.

Following this, the worship team have graciously agreed to share with you – and then lead you – in a song by Audrey Assad which captures the call and desire for God's Spirit to come and to work within the church and her people.

Consider to opening words:

O Spirit of the living God, thou Light and Fire Divine
Descend upon Thy Church once more

and make it truly Thine

Fill it with love and joy and power,
with righteousness and peace

Till Christ shall dwell in human hearts,
and sin and sorrow cease...