

A WAY TO BEGIN

COLOSSIANS 3: 12-17

DECEMBER 27, 2009 – THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHICAGO

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One of the most memorable experiences of my entire life occurred when I was in seminary at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. In those antediluvian days of long ago, very few women were studying for ordained ministry. Very few. Only two in St. Paul School of Theology: One was a woman seeking ordination in the Church of God, a very conservative Protestant body that scorned her because she was a woman and because she was going to graduate school. Her denomination believed that education robbed a pastor of the Spirit.

The other woman was a very beautiful and very spiritual refugee from Roman Catholicism who was planning to seek ordination in the Methodist Church. She was one of those people who evince a kind of detachment from the world, who possess a monastic, almost aloof quality, an other-worldliness that—truth to tell—I have a hard time relating to. When she announced one day in Theology Class 302 that she was going to be baptized by immersion—something Methodists rarely do—in a liturgy to which only her closest friends would be invited, I was intrigued. I did not consider myself among her closest friends, but I got invited anyway.

Because the chapel at St. Paul School of Theology on Truman Road (the Republicans still call it Fifteenth Street) does not have a baptistry, the liturgy was celebrated at the Nazarene seminary across town. About twenty of us gathered on an autumn evening in the Nazarene chapel, expecting a staid but affirming celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism. To our surprise, after the appropriate questions were asked concerning adult baptism, one's faith in God and desire to serve Christ, our friend took off all her clothes in order to be fully immersed in the baptistry.

To my further surprise, as my seminary compatriot stripped and walked serenely into the pool, the moment was not erotic at all. It was deeply, profoundly spiritual. For the first time in my life, I understood what it means to strip off the old self and put on the new, as St. Paul so powerfully states the case in today's Second Lesson:

“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.”

(Colossians 3: 12)

My friend was receiving the Sacrament of Baptism in the same fashion as the earliest Christians did: they took off all their clothes to signify the stripping of the old from their lives and when they emerged from the pool, they were given new garments to wear as a symbol of their new life in Christ.

The theme of stripping off the old self and putting on the new begins with Colossians 3:5. The contrast between what is old and what is new, what is dead and what is alive, what is on earth and what is above, confirms and shapes both the identity and the unity of believers in Christ. Today's passage, selected for the First Sunday after Christmas Day, presents a vivid portrait of what it means to be part of the community where "Christ is all and in all."

A good title for this sermon could be "How To Dress for Church." When I was growing up in the South, one dressed to the nines for church. Women wore hats, men wore suits and ties, children wore their best clothes. As I look at old pictures of worship at University Church and contemplate the ministry of May and Harvey Lord, it is apparent that major changes took place during their pastorate here. Harvey is shown in the earliest days of his ministry wearing a pulpit robe. The choir was similarly attired. But as the sixties and seventies revolutionized Hyde Park, Harvey grew a beard and long hair, robes were jettisoned and people began to dress as they do now.

Right dress, according to the apostle, is not a matter of individual piety. It is a matter of how we relate to one another in Christ—because Christ is all and in all. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience are all relational virtues. They mark how we think and behave toward one another in community.

Several years ago I consulted with a large mainline Protestant congregation in Louisville, Kentucky. On the Sunday before I began my stint of interviewing key members of the congregation, meeting with the governing board, looking at their history and helping them look to the future, I went to worship in their huge Gothic sanctuary. When it came time for the Kiss of Peace, the people in that congregation really went at it: kissing, hugging, talking, embracing, caring for one another.

After our first meetings on Monday, the pastor and I went to have coffee. He was so enthusiastic about the fellowship in his congregation. "Did you ever see such love in a church?" he asked me. "Well," I replied, "there was a lot of love shared among the members. But nobody spoke to me. Nobody hugged me. Nobody offered me any signs of peace."

"That's because they didn't know who you were," replied the pastor.

In the process of searching for a new pastor and seeking to grow this congregation, it may be imperative that we look not only at how we relate to one another in University Church, but how we relate to the stranger, the newcomer, the seeker. What does that person perceive about us? How does the seeker move into our inner circles? How does one move from seeking to acceptance?

The well-dressed congregation embraces everyone in love, in the reality of openness—not just spoken or addressed in a mission statement but in the reality of inquiry, wanting to know that person, wanting to share the faith with that seeker.

And within the congregation there lives the reality of forgiveness. “To forgive somebody,” says Frederick Buechner, “is to say one way or another, ‘You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantee that I will be able to forget what you’ve done and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us.’”

To accept forgiveness means that you acknowledge that you have done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven, and thus both parties have to swallow the same thing: pride.

When we pray in the prayer that Jesus taught us, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, we are NOT saying that God’s forgiveness is conditional upon our forgiving others. Forgiveness that is conditional is not really forgiveness at all—just Fair Warning. Moreover, our unforgiveness is one of the aspects of our lives that we most need to have forgiven by God.

Forgiveness brings the freedom to be at peace within one’s self and to be glad again to be in the presence of another person. Our ability to forgive others is reflective of our lived experience of being forgiven by God. This is the distinctive insight of the faith.

Let me be clear: what the apostle is calling for in this passage is not for the faint of heart. He is not talking about conflict avoidance—something at which Christian congregations are very adept. He is not talking about putting on a happy face and accentuating the positive. This is about what to do when bare-knuckled brawls break out.

Another reality is that the most blistering disputes occur among those with whom we are most intimate, with people we know well—sometimes too well. Our anger and our impulse to vengeance are most ravenous when they arise between a husband and wife, between lovers, between friends of longstanding, between brother and sister.

We live in a culture that pays lip service to kindness and compassion, to meekness and patience, but the people we most admire in our celebrity-driven culture and our get ahead, go ahead business world are those who are “tough on crime,” “strong on national defense,” “take no prisoners” in the market place. The apostle places the Christian life over against that kind of manipulation and malfeasance.

One more thing: he admonishes us to be thankful. The Greek term for “thankful” in this sentence is *eucharistoi*. On this first Sunday of the New Year when we celebrate the Eucharist as we also celebrate the Festival of Epiphany, gratitude is God’s gift to the church as well as the response we bring to God.