

“The Church at Christmas: Transformed!”—Colossians 3:12-17

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; 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.

So we know that, as the Church tells time, Christmas lasts another week—the Season of Christmas lasts until next Sunday, January 6, which we call The Epiphany. That’s why we call December 25 “Christmas *Day*” and not just “Christmas.” We’ve been taught this, and it’s been reinforced time and again. But, for a number of people, Christmas is functionally over—for some folks, Christmas was over by the afternoon of the 25th. The presents were opened, the meal was eaten, the decorations were taken down and put away, the tree went away, and Christmas was done. Other folks keep celebrating Christmas for a few more days after the 25th, and some will keep their decorations up and celebrations going until January 6. We’ve tried at our house to keep our decorations up until the Epiphany, but, in recent years, that decision has been made by she who has the power, and Michael and I (mostly Michael) obey.

Now, I’m not saying that keeping one’s decorations up past Christmas Day is more Christian or more correct than taking them down on the afternoon of the 25th—to each his own on that, I say. But here is the one thing we as the Church of the Lord Jesus must be careful of, as individuals and as the community of faith, and that is that we don’t put away the *spirit* of Christmas as we put away the *things* of Christmas. To put it another way, we can’t just drop all the compassion and kindness and peace and joy that we felt and feel during the Christmas Season and go back to the way we were before Christmas came upon us. If anything, we should look to *grow* that compassion and kindness and peace and joy, because, as the Church at Christmas, we are being *transformed*.

Now, I’ll grant you that our reading from the Letter to the Colossians is not your expected text for the Christmas Season. We expect to hear more about angels and shepherds and mangers and stars and wise guys from the east. Yet it may very well be this reading gets more to the heart of what Christmas is really about—for

Jesus, God in the flesh, came into the world to transform us as individuals, and through us, as his Church, to transform the world.

This is a text we need to hear, because, first, it reminds us of who we are—as Paul says, we are “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.” We are those who have accepted for ourselves the gift God offers to all humankind—the gift of redemption, the gift of salvation, the gift of a reconciled relationship with the one true God. We are those who have claimed the forgiveness of sin Jesus bought through his life, death, and resurrection. We are those who have claimed the new life that God offers to those who accept his gift. We are those who have claimed the gift of life with God forever, in the here-and-now and the hereafter. We are those who have been made holy—that is, set apart for God’s purposes—not by our own goodness, but by, as the old Communion service used to say, “the merits and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.” God loves the whole world, and God wants to redeem the whole world from sin and death; but those of us who have accepted the gift of God’s unearned, undeserved love—God’s grace—are God’s beloved. This passage from Colossians reminds us of who we are.

Yet we need to hear this text because, second, it reminds us of how we’re supposed to live with one another. Paul tells us that we should be “clothed” with *compassion*—with feeling for and with others. We should be “clothed” with *kindness*—which is more than *feeling* kindly: it’s *acting* with kindness and with an eye toward improving the lives of others. We should be “clothed” with *humility*—which doesn’t mean acting as doormat for everyone to simply walk over, but acting as a servant toward, not a lord over, all. We should be “clothed” with *meekness*, which sounds like another “doormat” word, but which really means “teachability”—the meek person is the one who is teachable, trainable, willing to be formed into what he or she can be. And we should be “clothed” with *patience*, which is less about waiting without agitation for something to happen and more about putting up with folks whom we find irritating and whom we would just as soon avoid—and Paul reinforces this by saying “Bear with one another.” What Paul is saying is that this is, or at least should be, our Christian character—it’s what Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, is seeking to make us. It’s toward this character, this way of life, that we are being transformed.

But there’s more. Paul invites the Colossians—and us—to “forgive each other,” which is perhaps the most difficult thing for us to do. We like to hold on to the hurts inflicted on us, to hold grudges, and to withhold forgiveness because we think that hurts the one who hurt us. But the truth is that withholding forgiveness, hanging on to our grudges, really only hurts ourselves—that hurt grows within us and makes us bitter. Forgiveness is as much about us and being reconciled within our spirits as it is about being reconciled with someone who has hurt us. But, more importantly, Paul says, we forgive because we have been forgiven: “just as the

Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” We forgive, not to *get* forgiveness, but because we have *been* forgiven—and if we can’t forgive, maybe we don’t understand what it means to be forgiven.

Yet there’s still more—for overarching all these elements of the Christian character, is “love”: not a warm, fuzzy *feeling* toward others, but self-sacrificing, self-giving love, love that *acts* in the best interests of others rather than in one’s own self-interest. When this is the ruling and guiding principle in the community of faith, then “the peace of Christ” will rule in our hearts, not just as individuals, but as “the one body” into which God in his grace has formed us. When this peace, this love, reigns in our lives as individuals and our life together as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,” then we as are the Church being transformed.

But we need to hear this passage, finally, because it reminds us that all this transformation is not our doing—it is the work of God through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives; and for that, we are called to “be thankful.” Paul says,

[W]ith 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.

This gratitude, this thankfulness, is a recognition that who we are and what we have are not our own doing—they are the work of God in our lives, as we are being transformed more and more into the image of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. And that recognition leads us to the source, the love and power and presence of God, that is making us more and more and more into what God is calling us to be. We become a joyous, peaceful, peaceable, grace-filled, and grateful people—we are a people transformed.

As we continue to celebrate the birth of the Savior, we understand that Jesus was born into this world so that we might become the people God is calling us to be. So if we put the spirit of Jesus away as we’re putting the Christmas decorations away, then we’ve missed the point of God’s coming into the world. Paul’s words to the Colossians remind us of who we are and what we’re called to be because God has come into the world in Jesus.

Yet we’re also reminded that God came into the world in Jesus not just to transform *us*, but to transform *the world*. That’s something we’re reminded of when we think about the mission statement of The United Methodist Church, which says that “the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”—and our own congregation’s mission statement, that “the mission of Bainbridge First United Methodist Church is to make disciples

of Jesus Christ for the transformation *of the community and* the world.” The point is that, as the Church is transformed, on the local level and in the world as a whole, we become the witness to the world that God is real, that he is alive, that he is in control, and that his love can make a difference in individual lives and in the life of the world. As the Church is transformed, we become the witness that there is a better, higher way of living, that we can live peaceably with one another, and that we can make a difference in the lives of others. The Church transformed is God’s instrument for sharing his transforming love with lost and broken and hurting and dying people in this lost and broken and hurting and dying world.

Well, it really doesn’t matter to me when you take down and put away your Christmas decorations. What we need to be careful of, however, is that we don’t put away the spirit of Jesus. Instead, let’s allow that spirit to continue to dwell in us, so that the Church at Christmas, and at all times, will be the Church transformed, inspired by and empowered by God’s Holy Spirit for God’s work of transforming the world. Dear God, let it be so for all of us!