

SECOND READING: Colossians 3:1-14

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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.² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

THIRD READING: Galatians 6:7-10

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Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.¹⁰ So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 40:27-31

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28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, The Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength. 30 Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, 31 But those who wait on the Lord. Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.

This is the word of the Lord.

“Of Things Above”

I need to begin today by telling you about something which happened to me this week, an experience I was given as I was beginning to prepare for today’s sermon on Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Early Wednesday morning, I drove to Austin to attend the Greater Austin Area Pastor’s Breakfast, provided each year by the Presbyterian Seminary. While I initially was hesitant to spend the time required to go, I ended up being very grateful for it all.

In a not atypical approach, the various tables of clergy, once fed, were given questions to address together, based on another of Paul’s writings, his letter to the Galatians, specifically Gal 6:9-10. The question for my table was: “Given the events of last week in Charlottesville, and the happenings during the many weeks and months preceding it, preachers and pastors can easily grow weary. How can we help each other work for the good of all?” (repeat)

Now, I usually say little during these kind of “group discussions”, but this time I found myself quickly entering the conversation and admitting that I was indeed weary...not physically, not mentally, but emotionally, spiritually. I mentioned that I had recently looked at my pastoral prayers from the summer of 2016 and was reminded of the things that FPC was lifting to God at that time (i.e. shootings in Orlando, in Dallas, the ugly political campaign, global warming, and the overwhelming number of refugees fleeing a destroyed Syria). I told the group that even then, I was already borrowing words from the psalmist of old, saying, “How long O Lord”. Even then FPC was praying, “Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy”. And now, on top of it all...Charlottesville!... where America saw large numbers of protestors and anti-protestors clashing, where we heard demonstrators shout racist, anti-Semitic slogans, where we saw high powered weapons brandished in the chaos, and attacks on an interfaith gathering of clergy and believers as they came to pray for peace and stand up for justice. We were horrified by the acts of violence, including murder...it all seemed too much...(and this was even before the jihadi terrorism in Barcelona).

The pastors at my table expressed similar sentiments. They said that some of them had attended Seminary against the backdrops of Selma and Birmingham, Vietnam, Watergate. Some in the room were at APTS during 9-11 and Ferguson, but they felt the current backdrop

of Charlottesville has sparked something new in our country's psyche. Dangerous and divisive behaviors have been unleashed/unearthed, unabashed behaviors incited by the KKK, neo-Nazis, misogynists, homophobes, and white supremacists, behaviors which are both profoundly un-American and un-Christian.¹ We, all of us, concluded that it has been too long time, far too long a time, that we, all of us, have been besieged with troubles, troubles from all corners of our world and nation. We confessed frustration and anger, loss for words for each other and our congregations, overwhelmed hearts...weariness.

As I left the breakfast, I realized that it'd been good to share feelings with other Church leaders, however we'd not actually addressed our table's question...*"how can we help each other (and our congregations) work for the good of all?* And it occurred to me that this was because we didn't really spend time studying the Scripture provided us. The Bible, you know, is not just a message book, but also a method book. Our reading of it should inform how we act. Inspired by the Spirit, we find there direction for our living, the "rule for life". But I think that too often, we use the Bible the other way around. We bring our agendas, political and otherwise, and try to read the Scripture into them, we try to justify our views by dusting verses onto them as we do sweet sugar on a donut.

So, Wednesday morning, on the way home, I looked to the Scripture again and considered more closely what Paul said to the believers in Galatia and Colossae, believers who obviously felt similarly weary. Fear must have been a constant in their lives as they broke from their cultures, their faith traditions, their families and as they were threatened by a brutal government merely because they professed to follow Jesus. Paul's words provided encouragement and affirmation and direction. He directed them to look not to themselves to resolve their weariness, but instead to God, and then as children of the Resurrection to be energized by the indwelling Spirit to live with new purpose. Rather than trying to be "happy" in life, their new goal was to be Christ-like.² Anything else, he said, would lead simply to death.

¹Ted Wardlaw, president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. "Letter to Campus Community of Students, Faculty & Staff." APTS. 8-16-17.

² Salem Christian School. "An interview by Paul Bradshaw with Rick Warren." <https://www.salemchristianhomeschool.com/478/custom/14359>. (accessed 8-16-2017).

As I considered the text, I recognized it. It was in concert with the direction given in the rest of the biblical witness. Isaiah, for example, in the 6th c BCE, said this: *“those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary.”* In Matthew, Jesus said: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. (Mt 11:28-30).* The writer of 1st Peter advised, *“Cast all your anxiety on Him because he cares for you.”* (1Pe 5:7) And the psalmist and writer of Proverbs said, respectively *“Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.”* (Ps 105:4) and *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”* (Prov 3:5-6)

Specifically, Paul said this: *If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal LIFE,”* and to the Colossians, he said, *“Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is...Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.... put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”* (Pause)

You know, this concept of “setting our hearts and minds on things above and putting on Christ” is so central to the faith. The believers of the 3rd and 4th c knew it and consequently included very poignant imagery to teach it in their baptismal ceremonies. *When confirmands, new entrants to the church, were baptized, usually early, before sunrise, on Easter morning, they were gathered in the inner baptistery of the church, men separate from women. All were then instructed by the bishop’s loud command to “take off their clothes”, whereupon they were immersed in the water of the huge fonts. When they emerged, they were given white robes to put on, covering them head to feet, and then they were ushered to the out of doors, into the sunlight to the “Alleluias” of the singing rest of the Church.*³ Beautiful!

Scripture, the source of direction for our living, the only source, friends, tells us that first we need not despair or grow weary with troubles, but should turn to Jesus and rely on his power.

³ Jennifer Lord. Worship & Theology course at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Spring, 2010.

Then we need let go of self-interests and live for him. When we do this, we are, by definition, taking off, getting rid of, the bad behaviors and attitudes of our past lives, and we are being dressed with compassion, kindness, humility, forgiveness, and love. By opening ourselves up to the living presence of the resurrected Christ in us, we are transformed, transfigured, and we are ENERGIZED to boldly and courageously then address our broken world. It's how the world is changed.

I like the story of a young man who was a member of his church's high school confirmation class. Because he the only member who had not been baptized as a baby, the pastor asked him to visit with her in her office. She began by explaining the theology of baptism and how things would go on the next Sunday morning. However, when she finished, the young man said, "Hey, I'm going out to the lake with a couple of friends this afternoon. Why can't I just get baptized out there today?" The pastor began quoting polity to explain to him why baptism usually take place on Sundays within the body of believers and then she added, "and besides, if you get baptized on Saturday, how will the people at the church even know? Without missing a beat, the boy answered, "By the way I act, of course."'⁴

So, brothers and sisters, what does setting our hearts and minds on things above, putting on Christ, specifically look like today? Well, it means, that after relinquishing our self-promotion to the God who gives us the energy, power, the know-how, the freedom, and the skill to do Christ's work in the world, we need to name and renounce evil in whatever form it comes to us. We need not recoil or stay silent, but courageously stand firm, throwing our weight to the good... to things of compassion, kindness, humility, forgiveness, and love. This may amount to simply but clearly speaking the truth in love if racist or bigoted conversation begins to happen around us. It MAY include LITERALLY but peacefully standing or marching against hatred and violence, against injustice and unfair practices. It may be using our voices to speak for those who have no voice, who are outcast, marginalized, or persecuted, by writing letters or signing petitions or kindly conversing on social media. It may be by financially supporting

⁴ Quoted in Joanna M. Adams. Sermon: "Character Development" <http://morningsidepc.com/archive/s3.amazonaws.com/dfc/attachments/public/documents/1200363/S081306.pdf>. (accessed 8-16-17).

agencies which are all about peace, mercy and equity, or just insisting on showing love whenever opportunities present themselves in our daily lives. Whatever form it may take, it requires prayer, unceasing prayer, and an understanding that it will not be easy. Growing toward God's grace is never that, but the time is now to be the Church in all that we say and do. We are being called to action. We always are.

So, I think we can now answer the question, my table's question, "*how can we help each other work for the good of all?*" Austin Seminary's president, Ted Wardlaw, wrote a letter of encouragement to the incoming students and staff. I think in it, he says it well and does it even better. No doubt, after Wednesday's breakfast, he went to scripture too. *He says "In your days and weeks and months ahead here, I urge you to pray for peace and wisdom, and then to practice hospitality and kindness toward the world and one another toward those whom you find easy to love, as well as those who are most difficult to love; and toward yourselves when you stumble and fall and get back up. I urge you to try with all your might to see this world and all of its people with the eyesight of God; even as, in God's name, we actively resist hatred, intolerance and violence. I urge you to be open to listening reverently to those who come from different contexts, races, or points of view. I urge you to remember that the opposite of love is not hate, but fear; and thus to not live in fear but toward a life of faithful boldness. Let us engage one another in the many intersections in which we encounter the grace and wisdom and strength of God and God's people."*⁵ Friends, let too uphold each other each day as we learn what it really means, during times of crisis, to think on things above and put on the One who is our light. If we do so we will not grow weary in doing what is right, we will reap at harvest time, and we will be working for the good of all. "*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, The Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary...those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.*" Amen.

⁵Ted Wardlaw. Letter.

Dominican Timothy Radcliffe tells the story of Mother Theresa going to a party in her honor attended by important people in Rome. Before entering the party, she stopped to talk at length to a beggar nearby. People began to come out to look for her, and urge her to go in since all sorts of “the great and the good” were waiting for her. She objected firmly, and without hesitation, “Can’t you see that I am talking to Christ?”⁶

There’s a little poem by Bonaro Overstreet which is helpful in this last regard.⁷

*You say the little efforts that I make
Will do no good; They never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
Where Justice swings in the balance.
I do not think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right
To choose the good which shall feel
The stubborn ounces of my weight.*

⁶Timothy Radcliffe. *Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing; 2012), 103.

⁷ Bonario. Overstreet. “*Stubborn Ounces*” Quoted in Joanna M. Adams. Sermon: “*The Stubborn Ounces of Our Weight*”. http://morning-sidepc.com/archive/s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/1200372/S123106.pdf (accessed 8-18-17).