

**Scripture Lesson:** Colossians 3:12-17

*Pew Bible N.T. pg. 190*

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup>And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.

Colossians 3:12-17

09/08/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Grounded in Gratitude”

Rev. Amy Terhune

In the fall of 2001, not long after the events of Sept. 11, a poem began making its way through email chains and magazines. Social media hadn't really taken off yet, although I now see it on social media around this time of year. It's called “The Difference One Day Makes”

On Monday, we e-mailed jokes.

On Tuesday, we did not.

On Monday, we were fussing about praying in school.

On Tuesday, we prayed everywhere.

On Monday, our heroes were athletes.

On Tuesday, our heroes were firefighters and first responders.

On Monday, there were people trying to separate us by gender, color, and creed.

On Tuesday, we were one.

On Monday, we were irritated waiting 5 minutes in a fast-food line.

On Tuesday, we stood in line for hours to give blood.

On Monday, we were entitled to what we had coming

On Tuesday, we gave it away to those in need.

On Monday, we argued with our kids to clean up their rooms.

On Tuesday, we couldn't get home fast enough to hug our kids.

On Monday, we went to work as usual.

On Tuesday, we went to work, but some of us didn't come home.

On Monday, we had families.

On Tuesday, we had orphans.

On Monday, September 10th, life felt routine.

On Tuesday, September 11th, it did not.

What a difference one day makes. [*original source unknown*]

Now, I'm not trying to be maudlin, friends. To be sure, we'll mark the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks this Wednesday. But for many of us, the tragic events of 9/11 reminded us of the fleeting nature of life and the importance of appreciating the blessings in our lives – the people, the opportunities, the simple things that make life worthwhile.

When I sit down with a family to prepare for a funeral, the vast majority of the time, the word gratitude shows up early in the conversation. We're grateful for the lives of those we have loved. None of them are perfect. We have our share of fights and broken promises and human foibles, but such things pale in comparison to the gifts and graces of those we love. In the end, we celebrate the lives of the saints with gratitude, because they touched us, because they shared love and life by our side. Gratitude is nearly always a pervasive emotion at celebrations of life.

But in the busyness and hectic labors of daily living, many of us can get forgetful or distracted. We may fight about things that don't really matter, we get irritated and impatient, we get caught up in the routine tasks that have to be done. Who's going to cook dinner? Who's going to fill the car with gas? Who's going to pay the bills? Who's going to clean the bathroom? We get tired. We get run down. And we can lose sight of the preciousness of those who share life's journey with us. But when tragedy strikes, we remember, don't we? It comes back to us. Friends, we don't have to wait for a tragedy or for a death or an illness or a close call. If we just slow down, take a breath, rest a moment in God's light, we remember and we're thankful.

What's true of life can also be true of faith. It's easy to forget the beauty of God's created world around us. It's easy to lose sight of the enormity of Jesus' sacrifice for our sin. It's easy to be distracted away from God's work in us to redeem and transform the world. And when we forget, we neglect creation, we may suffer a sense of arrogance or entitlement, we may lose hope and grow cynical, we may get callous and insensitive. But when we slow down and take a breath, our faith reminds us of God's incredible work in our world on our behalf, and we're grateful. And that is when we reconnect with hope, we rediscover God's call, we recommit to God's work.

And that's the thrust of our lesson this morning. But before we dive into the Word, let me offer briefly just a bit of background. Colossians is one of the letters about which scholars love to debate. Many believe that it was not written by Paul himself, but by a student or secretary who served with Paul writing after Paul's death. Since the letter purports to be from both Paul and Timothy, it's possible that Timothy did the writing here. Or it could be someone else. In ancient days, one would honor a great teacher by writing in their name. For our purposes this morning, it doesn't much matter. The vocabulary and the syntax are different from Paul's authentic letters, but there's definite thematic continuity.

One of the things that makes this letter so fascinating is not just that there's a question of pseudonyms around the author, but also around the audience. Colossae was a small town in the Lycus Valley in the region of Phrygia, in the southwestern quadrant of modern Turkey. It's about 15 and 12 miles southeast of the ancient cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, at the foot of Mt. Cadmus. According to ancient historians, that whole region was devastated by a massive earthquake in year 61 A.D., approximately 4 years or so before the Apostle Paul was beheaded in Rome. The bigger cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis were rebuilt, but Colossae lay in ruins for several decades before anyone got around to rebuilding it, so if the letter was written around the time of or after Paul's death, the church at Colossae no longer existed. It's quite likely that this letter may have been written to churches of the region, as Revelation was, with the purpose of inspiring Christians there to reject new philosophical movements rising up in that region and the time and remain true to authentic Christian teaching. In particular, the letter to the Colossians stresses the power of the cosmic Christ, who was present at

creation, and who is now in the process of creating and shaping a new world – God’s Kingdom on earth.

In today’s lesson, then, we hear the author’s invitation to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. But we’re not talking about clothes that you can add or shed depending on the weather, like a sweater or something. This is about identity. We’re talking about something like a uniform or a symbol. The thing that comes to my mind is this stole I wear. It symbolizes the yoke of Christ – the burden of servant leadership. I’ve worn it ever since the Bishop put hands on my head and ordained me. And even though I take this stole off after worship, I carry the weight of it deep within all the time. It marks part of who I am, and even when it’s just God and I alone in prayer, my identity as a servant and pastor impacts how I pray and how I ask God to be at work in my life. Another example seen in scripture is when the prophets ask: can a mother forget her nursing infant, or a father turn a deaf ear to the cry of his child? No. There are some identities that we cannot take on and off – we carry them in the fibers of our being. Our faith should be that kind of fiber; that kind of material. It’s something we wear all the time – something we can’t take on and off; something that defines the essence of who we are.

The author who wrote the passage saw that the end times were not coming as quickly as they’d hoped. And so he reminds the people that this world can be reborn – that God is doing a new thing in us; in the way we live and relate to others. The marks of one who knows they are a child of God are visible. We are compassionate, kind, humble, unassuming, and patient. We never forget that we are forgiven recipients of God’s grace. Love is what binds us, peace is what rules us, but gratitude is what holds us. It’s where we start. Gratitude is where it all begins. And because we are grateful for Christ’s breath in us giving us life, Christ’s forgiving grace renewing that life, Christ’s love filling our lives, so we share those gifts. Because we have received compassion, we give it. Because we are forgiven, we forgive. Because we are loved, we love. It sounds simple, but it’s not. It’s one of the hardest things we do. It’s easy to forget the gifts we’ve been given. Which is why we must intentionally take them on again each morning. Like getting dressed or brushing our teeth, we put on the gifts God gives us, gratefully remembering who and whose we are.

As we begin to look ahead at how God calls us to live out our faith in this time and place, we start with gratitude. We remember what God has done in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We remember our own history as a church, and all those who found hope and grace through ministry across the years – all those who stepped out in faith to share that beyond themselves. First U.M.C. started with a pastor and four lay people. They met in a courthouse and a school. It took them three years to buy a tiny little building, and ten years to build a church downtown. They weathered a fire and rebuilt in the 1880s. They got landlocked and moved out here to build again in the 1950s. They cared for kids, for the elderly, for the sick, for those in prison; they fed the hungry; they welcomed the stranger, they shared the gospel. They were grateful. So are we.

And we remember all the times in our own personal history when God has carried us through. I recall laying in hospital bed five months pregnant as horrific pain rippled through my abdomen. I was sure I was miscarrying, and I was scared and heartbroken and hurting. But there was a cross on the wall in my room, and when I looked at it, I knew I wasn’t going through this alone. Thankfully, I didn’t miscarry. I had gallbladder disease, but I didn’t know that at that time. All I knew at the time was that God was there, and I felt gratitude for that abiding presence.

I share that gratitude with a pastor named Martin Rinkart, who served the church in Eilenburg, Germany from 1617 to 1649. In 1618, just a year after he started there, “...what has come to be known as the Thirty-Years-War broke out. His town was caught right in the middle of it. In 1637, the massive plague that swept across the continent hit Eilenburg... people died at the rate of fifty a day, and the

man called upon to bury most of them was Martin Rinkert. In all, over 8,000 people died in Eilenburg, including Martin's own wife. His labors finally came to an end about 11 years later, just one year after the conclusion of the war. His ministry spanned 32 years, all but the first and the last overwhelmed by the great conflict that engulfed his town. And yet, despite the bloodshed, grief, and devastation, Martin Rinkard penned words we'll sing today:

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices;  
Who wondrous things hath done; in whom his world rejoices.  
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

He knew God's gifts. He experienced God's presence. And he sang his gratitude. [3 ¶s adapted from illustrations on Gratitude, Brett Blair, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

So let me close with a story Dr. David McLennan tells about his first job when he was just a boy of 13 or 14 years old back in the late 1940s. He was hired on by the local grocery store to sweep floors, pack groceries and stock shelves. "On one particular Saturday, he recalled, he heard the owner say to one of the clerks "It's that time of the year again, it's time to take inventory." Dr. McLennan wrote that this was a word that had not yet entered into his vocabulary. When an opportune moment arrived, he asked, "what is an inventory?" Patiently the owner explained that it was a time when you made a list of everything that you had – from groceries on the shelves to wrapping paper and string. Still somewhat puzzled, the young McLennan then asked, "Why?"

"Well, responded the owner, it's easy to forget exactly how much you have each year, easy to lose track of things. Every now and then you have to take an inventory just to see what all you have." [2 ¶s adapted from illustrations on Gratitude, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Friends, as we prepare to live out our vision for First U.M.C. in the coming few years, we need to take inventory. We have so much. To be sure, for some of us, there's some grief. Churches we have loved have closed. People we have loved have gone on. Times have changed and things are different. But in spite of all that, God is. And God is good. God is giving. God is blessing. God is calling. And God is present with us, leading, guiding, loving, challenging us to live out our gratitude. So let's take inventory. In what ways has God blessed this church? When it comes to your church family, for what are grateful? For whom are you grateful? Where do you see God at work among us or in your life. Take that brightly colored card and spend a few moments taking inventory. Write down something about your church for which you're grateful, and then bring your card forward as you feel led and affix to one of the posters up front. When we're done, we'll have a beautiful testimony of God's blessings and gifts to ground us in gratitude as we step out in faith to where God is calling us to grow. Thanks be to God. Amen.