

“Freedom in Relationship”

a sermon by

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Text: “And above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything in perfect harmony”
(Colossians 3:14).

Our latest battles have been over trashcans, elephants and flowers. I want the kitchen trashcan in the pantry, where you cannot see it; my husband Hunter wants it out in the kitchen where you can easily get to it; I was thrilled with the large elephants I bought to go on the pedestals in the living room; Hunter was flatly neutral – actually quite skeptical; I wanted to move the flowers off of Hunter’s chest of drawers and put them in the center of my dresser in front of my mirror; Hunter commented that he didn’t approve of that idea since he could no longer see himself as he tied his tie.

The trashcan is out of the pantry and back in the kitchen and the flowers have stayed on Hunter’s chest of drawers, but the elephants are proudly standing on their pedestals in our living room. Pretty petty quibbles, huh? And yet, I know from enough years of working as a marriage counselor, how common and frequent these types of quibbles are – proper loading of dishwashers, failing to reset odometers, not using coasters, forgetting to turn out lights – all these

seemingly trivial events are fair game in family bickering. What I have learned is that when the quibbles become constant, reoccurring, drag-out battles, they are usually about far more than trashcans, dishwashers, and coasters: They are often about power.

Of course, you don't have to be married and to have a family to be familiar with these power-struggles. Our passage from Luke we just read gives us a great example. The stage is set: Jesus has just had one of the most meaningful occasions of his ministry, sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. The words he said to them were sobering as he broke the bread and shared the cup, speaking of his suffering and impending death. He spoke of *giving* up his life for them: ***"This is my body, broken for you."*** However, what follows after these words is even more jarring. Jesus next warns that one of them sitting at the table with him will betray him. As the disciples stare at each other, absorbing these words and trying to figure out who among them would be a traitor, they actually began to argue about who is the greatest. ***Imagine, Jesus just saying that he was going to give up his life for them, and they start arguing about whom is the greatest!*** If you are like me, you may not have to imagine too hard, for I think that question is secretly in our minds much of the time, whether it be in the workplace, among friends, at church, or in family relationships. I am not saying we are always aware of the question, and yet when we begin to battle about things such as dishwashers, odometers, trashcans, elephants, or flowers, the battle often really becomes about who is right and who is going to get their way.

Notice however, that once again Jesus turns the tables on his disciples. Jesus says to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them... ***but not so among you; rather the greatest must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.***" You must know by now how anti-cultural Jesus' message is. You must know by now that Jesus' definition of power is not the same as our societal definition of power. I don't think Jesus would make it on Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*. He would not survive, at least according to our definition, on *Survivor*. If he was in a boardroom, he would be washing feet or letting a woman pour expensive perfume over his head. Jesus' power comes from God, and it is a power that is relational, not individualistic; a power that is ***FREE*** to serve – ***Free to serve (sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it?)***. Jesus' power is one that, as we read in Colossians, this morning ***binds everything together in perfect harmony***, rather than sets people against each other.

While Jesus defines power in a completely different way than we do the apostle Paul expands upon this message by redefining the meaning of freedom for us.

Freedom is rooted in choice. To be able to make a choice, one must have power to choose. In other words, truly one cannot be forced to make a choice. Jesus combated the legalism prevalent in Jewish religion that forced burdensome ritual instead of empowered faith. Paul lifted up this gospel message in the letter to the Romans. He strongly asserted that we are not saved by law, that law brings about death, but that God's love and grace brings us new life. When we live by and for the law, we are not whole beings. Of course we must have the law, for we are sinful beings, inclined to destructive passions that cause harm to ourselves or others. However, if we live to only satisfy the law, then we are not living into our God-given freedom. So if we are called as Christians to live as free people, saved not by our own goodness, but by God's grace,

what happens when my freedom runs into your freedom?! The one and the same trashcan cannot be in both the kitchen and the pantry at the same time, nor the elephants back at the store and sitting in our living room at the same time. One way to look at it is someone is going to lose! Another perception, however, is that to be in relationship with each other, both of us have to choose at certain points, out of love and necessity, to restrict our freedom for the sake of our relationship. The key is this: if I am the one *all the time* restricting my freedom for the sake of our relationship or if I am the one all the time expecting you to give unto me, our relationship is no longer built on love and respect, but on a model of dominance – a model of power that Jesus explicitly rejects.

The writer of the book of Colossians, who might have been Paul or might have been a follower of Paul, challenges the people of Colossae to “*strip off the old self with its practices and clothe yourself with a new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.*” What gets lost for us 2000 years later is that the language being used of stripping oneself of old practices and putting on new clothes is ancient baptismal language. Of course we as Presbyterians “sprinkle” when we baptize. But the imagery used here relates to the tradition of baptism, where one literally strips of clothes and is taken backward by the minister into the water, so that he or she is completely immersed. The immersion is symbolic of a drowning experience, a dying so that when one comes up out of the water, a rebirth is experienced. After baptism the person dons new clothes as an analogy of putting on this new self. With this rebirth, one is renewed in one’s knowledge or as a more literal Greek translation reads, the new self is renewed in its *perception* “according to the image of its creator.” In this new knowledge or new perception of the world, a person is no longer an egocentric being, ruled by impulsive passions of greed and self-centered desires. Instead a person who is reborn in the image of his or her creator, is a person whose life has become redefined, recentered in Christ’s love. The writer of Colossae is very specific as to what it looks like to be a new self in the image of the creator. One becomes a person whose relationships are no longer defined by symbols of status and superiority, who him or herself is not longer defined according to race, nationality, slave or freed, male or female, but whose relationships and very being are defined by love – a love that binds everything together into a whole. *Christ is all in all* as the one who reconciles us to each other. In other words, this new self necessitates a new understanding of “*I*”.

Perhaps we can learn from the geese. I was handed the following information about geese this past week that made me think about a goose I used to see every spring. Geese actually mate for life. When I was working as a pastoral counselor at the Presbyterian Samaritan Counseling Center, which is in the house on the campus of Sharon Presbyterian Church, every spring a single goose would show up in the middle of the large asphalt parking lot for about 4-6 weeks. It would look lonely and displaced as it wandered in the midst of the concrete, sometimes hanging out under a tree or in a patch of grass. I was commenting on this lonely goose to the Rev. John Alexander, who was then pastor of Sharon Church. He laughed and told me that this goose’s mate was across the busy street – Sharon Road – at the campus of Sharon Towers. Every spring after the female goose had laid her eggs and was protecting them, she apparently kicked the male goose out of the nest and sent him across the street until the goslings hatched (that or he decided to go hang out in a quiet spot for awhile). Once the goslings hatched,

he would return to the nest. John and I decided that perhaps this goose couple needed the services of the counseling center!

But the following information I was handed about geese this past week, entitled “Lesson of the Goose,” puts their relationship into a whole new light of give and take and commitment. The “Lesson of the Goose” reads:

As each goose flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird behind it. By flying in a V-formation, the whole flock adds 71% more flying range than if each bird flew alone. When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down. They stay with the goose to help and protect it until it is able to fly again or dies. Then they launch out with another formation to catch up with the flock. Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels a drag and resistance of trying to fly alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front. When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into formation and another goose flies at the point position. The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. The power of the goose lies in its relationship to the whole, not its separateness.

As I stated earlier, when we strip off the old self with its practices or habits, and clothe ourselves in a new self, we redefine our understanding of “I”. Our perception shifts. “I” am no longer defined by my own personal power, but “I” become empowered in my relationship **with** God and others. When my perception shifts and “I” am no longer the center of the world, “I” develop a new wardrobe. No longer am I clothed with impulsive self-centered passions. Instead, the new “I” gains a new sense of freedom in choosing how to respond to my passions. Out of love, I choose to no longer be motivated to satisfy only my desires. Instead, I don new clothes. The writer of Colossians describes these clothes as compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Notice every single one of these qualities are relational ones, not individualistic ones. And again, these are not qualities that will get you on the TV show *The Apprentice*. But above all, the writer of Colossians asserts – clothe yourself with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

There are three Greek words for love – agape, philios, and eros. The word used here is agape love, which connotes a kind of love that is self-giving and centered in the well being of all. One commentator writes, “This kind of love does not always run with its natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discovered. Love seeks the welfare of all.”

It is not that the individual is obliterated – this is a misunderstanding that is dangerous in itself. God created us to be individual in relationship. The hard part is figuring out a way for this to happen that honors both the individual and the relationship.

If we were to have read the next 7 verses in Colossians that followed these passages on love, we would have come across what is frequently called the “Household Code.” You can find the “Household Code” in Ephesians, Colossians, I Peter, and the Pastoral Epistles. It is the section that goes into detail explaining the relationship of husbands to wives, wives to husbands, parents to children and children to parents, and finally slaves to masters and masters to slaves.

The Household Code follows the societal structure of the time period of Paul – a time period when women were considered as property and had status only as a wife and mother, and slaves were legal. The writer of Colossians did not actively challenge the structures of that time period; rather he addressed the character of relationships within those structures. For every admonition to one party, there is an equal and just as challenging admonition to the other party. It is important for us to understand how very unusual the writer's treatment of women and slaves was for that time period, for he treated them as actually having needs and rights – a pretty radical position to have taken. Fortunately, we live in an age where the actual structures of these relationships have been radically altered – thank God, we in the United States no longer have slaves. Thank God, women in the United States are no longer considered as property. And yet all of our relationships – working, congregational, marital, parental, friendships – stand under the same challenge that was given to the people of Colossae: Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. As one commentator states, “In the Lord, the principle of reciprocity, mutual dependence, and service to one another comes into effect in a new way.”

In marriage counseling, I often compare a negative spiral with a positive spiral. A negative spiral in a relationship is created by two – one person's snide comment feeds the other person's snide comment, one's criticism leads to a defense and criticism by the other. A negative cycle can be changed to a positive cycle when both – not just one – but both parties make the effort to start changing in a positive direction – to put on new clothes. This takes humility (not always having to be right or in charge), compassion (having sympathy for the other's position), kindness (holding back the mean comments), patience (knowing that change is hard and takes time), and most of all forgiveness (rooted in our own experience of forgiveness in Christ). The power that is often created in relationships where the negative cycle is transformed into a positive cycle reminds me a great deal of the geese who add 71% of their flying range if they fly together rather than alone.

You know what made the most impact on me in watching Michael Phelp's incredible swimming performance in the Olympics – it wasn't all those gold medals that he won, although that certainly was impressive. It was his setting aside his own desire to win one more race, so that his teammate could have a chance to swim and compete for a gold in the medley relay – a race that Michael had earlier said he was dying to swim. Listen carefully to Michael's explanation of letting go of this race: “This is the decision that I chose,” he said. Saturday night “I will be in the stands, and I will be cheering as hard as I can for the U.S. Team....We came into this meet as a team, and we're going to be leaving it as a team.”

Michael chose – he was not forced or told by a coach – Michael chose his relationship with his teammate and team over his own individualistic desires. It was a choice he made freely, for otherwise it would have meant nothing. It was a choice that spoke volumes to his teammates and the world, and a choice that may be remembered more than any particular race he swam. It was a free choice that bound his team together. Hear again this charge:

“And above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

