



“Everything in the Name of Jesus”

a sermon by

Kathleen A Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

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As our Lenten series of spiritual disciplines continues, we turn to the book of Colossians chapter 3:12-17 to take up the topic of worship. In the verses prior to our passage for the day, we find the discussion of the new life in Christ, in which there is no longer Jew nor Greek, as there is also no longer room for things of the old life such as lying and slander. Putting on the garment of Christ means all must strive to be conformed to Christ, and all are one in him. The author is writing to the community to keep them centered on faith and life in Christ in the midst of secular philosophies and pagan worship that seek to persuade them to live and worship in a manner that is different from their new calling as a people of God. “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.”

It is a tall order that Paul, or Timothy, prescribes here in this letter to the Colossians. To hear them talk about the new life in Christ that is to characterize the community of faith, one would think that they had had, to quote my colleague from his sermon this past Sunday, a few too many poppy seeds on their morning muffin. In the verses just prior to our reading, Paul writes “These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things - anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self ...” Paul makes it clear that we have been born into a new life in Christ, and that new life demands new action, new definitions of right living, new methods of honoring a God who is not content with burnt offerings on an altar but rather requires the sacrifice of our lives through broken hearts and humbled spirits and love in relationships each and every day. If we are thinking in terms of Lenten disciplines that feel impossible to master, it would seem that this would be the perfect text to consider. “In fact, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bear with one another and forgive, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And don’t forget that whatever you do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” I’ll admit that the cynical part of me hears this vision for the Christian life from the apostle and clouds my thoughts about what life might look like if I carried out this command to its fullest. Surely if I practiced meekness that would mean that I would get cut off at every light on South Boulevard on my way to work in the morning in the name of Jesus. By exercising forgiveness I would be considered a sucker in the name of Jesus. With great patience I would sip cold soup, having waited as my lunch order sat on the counter unnoticed while a delightful young cashier chatted with a friend - in the name of Jesus. Were I in another profession, I am sure that if I were working on a big corporate merger or focusing on closing a deal, clothing myself with love would bring about harmony as I wrestled with

angry clients and ironed out the complexities of contracts while keeping an eye on the bottom line in the name of Jesus. It seems like a wonderful vision, Paul, but how in the world is it ever supposed to work? How could we ever be expected to claim the habits of this new life in Christ if those of the old life just beckon us to pick them up, if the world makes such a powerful case for why we will not survive without putting on the armor of callousness, brevity, pride, unabashed boldness, and thrift rather than clothing ourselves with Christ? How do we make the choice, Paul, for peace, when it seems like so much else is necessary for self-preservation?

Glance through the archives of the Christian tradition and you will find this question pressing in on every generation. From the earliest Christian communities that faced a hostile climate if they were found out - that is, if you consider the threat of being tied in a sack with scorpions and rocks and thrown into the sea hostile, of course - to the modern civil rights movement that faced overwhelming obstacles of systemic and institutionalized structures of white power, violence, and oppression. Each chapter in our history as a people of faith deals with this question of survival in the world and struggle to live into the fullness of the new life in Christ. And each chapter illustrates a consistent response to this question despite the changing times, irregardless of boundaries of continents or language or economics, and against all odds or rationale and it is a response centered upon the act of corporate worship. Worship of all things. What is so often relegated in our society to an act of merely giving credit where credit is due or worse yet obligation, is something that has defined and sustained us as a people of God since those early and hopeful moments in heaven and on earth on that very first Christmas eve. At the root of worship is the same thing that is at the basis of Paul's commission to clothe ourselves with compassion - it is the joyful response to the graciousness of God, an outpouring of communal gratitude for the gift of Jesus Christ for our sins. So as we are holy and beloved we forgive as we have been forgiven, seek peace because we were called to peace and given the gift of peace, we teach and admonish one another in wisdom because in Christ no one person or group has a monopoly on truth, and with gratitude in our hearts we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God in the name of the Lord Jesus. Worship, then, is a discipline of joyful obedience, rather than one of servitude because it is by definition an act of praise.¹

But there is more to worship than simply praise. Something else happens in worship other than the expression of gratitude or humility before God. The act of worship permeates life. Perhaps it is because of the powerful and quiet impact of spirit speaking to spirit, or disciple coming before God in awe and brokenness and gratitude beside disciple, or perhaps because we somewhere within us realize that it is only as the community of faith - not as the individually faithful - that we are the body of Christ. This discussion of worship in Paul's letter springs from gratitude to be sure but also speaks to that which will enable us to live out that call to new life in Christ, that will help us to be and do all those things like allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts, and clothing ourselves with a love that binds everything together in perfect harmony. Worship is considered a discipline not because it is meant to punish or confine us, or guilt us into

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1995.

doing it, but because it is a means by which we may invite God into every corner of our life and claim the freedoms we have been given in Christ. It is a way to lower our defenses before God and allow ourselves to be pulled out of our preoccupation with daily tasks and surface-level living and plunge into greater depths of life in Christ by hearing the stories, and singing songs - lifting our voices and our minds to God not because it is the most productive use of our time, not because we are always so engaged by worship, but because it is what we were made for. To worship God and celebrate the vantage of seeing all of life through the lens of the resurrection. One can imagine Paul sitting in prison singing hymns by himself as an illustration of this point. As we invite the word of Christ to dwell in us richly in worship, it will begin to dwell in us richly in everything else, too. Richard Foster says that to worship is to change, to place ourselves before God so that we can be transformed.² Paul writes that we have already been transformed by Christ, but worshiping in community with one another allows us to live into the hope that we are a people called out by God, transformed by Christ, and called to transform the world by responding to the inner work of the spirit within us.

Christians historically have sought out a space to worship as a community despite fear or threat of death. People have set out on ships in search of a new land where they might find the space to worship freely. Worship has been used as a form of protest, as a demonstration of peace. It has been used, sadly, to incite some to violence and hatred. Beyond the power of worship to praise God and to deepen our personal walk with God is the power of worship to shape and transform communities, to challenge us to share the gospel that has changed our life with the world in the way we speak and act, to embody the new life in Christ we have inherited in the society in which we live. In his movement for racial equality, Dr. Martin Luther King Junior book-ended protests with worship, helping the community of faith around him to claim their identity as a people of God and follow their conclusions about the meaning of freedom in Christ to the next step of seeking freedom in their own country. He wrote, "We must remember that it is possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips and deny his existence with your life." Dr. King and Paul seem to have been on the same page on this point. For our scripture attests that there is nothing status quo about the powerful new reality that has taken place in our lives- in this world- in Christ and it is our challenge, as the body of Christ in the community gathered together, to bring Christ into the world. What we do here each Wednesday, what you do in countless ways when you celebrate the gifts of God together and share the good news of your faith with one another and those around you, is draw empowerment from worship to speak those hard words of truth in love, to embody the act of worship itself by carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ with you into the world, and taking it with you boldly into where you live so that realities might be transformed and new life in Christ might flourish.

On first glance it does seem that Paul paints an idyllic vision of what life in Christ should look like with his talk of humility and kindness and forgiveness. But upon further thought, maybe he wasn't idealizing this new reality at all. Maybe he was just celebrating that in all the conflicts, in all the trials, in all the mire of this world, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothing ourselves in Christ means knowing that he is in

² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, San Francisco, Harper, 1988.

the center of it all and is in control. And so we worship God as a response to this goodness. And in worshiping him we are living out the true task of discipleship by loving God together and being changed together and causing change in the world around us together. We are nurturing ourselves with the gospel and being empowered by the Spirit to let that gospel infiltrate every corner of our lives, so that truly whatever we do, in word or deed, we do everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.