

"New Clothes for Christmas"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee Florida
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WHAT GOOD IS CHRISTMAS?

Each year I watch it on TV. George C. Scott plays Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's classic tale, A Christmas Carol. There are some lines in that film that never fail to produce a chuckle. One that I find particularly amusing was when old Ebenezer told his nephew, "I would like to take every fool with a merry Christmas on his lips and boil him in his own Christmas pudding."

Now comes the time of the year when the Ebenezer Scrooges of the world get the upper hand. Christmas has come and gone once again. What good did it accomplish? Once again this year I have heard the modern equivalent of Ebenezer Scrooge on my TV set. Psychologists were talking about the Christmas blues, unrealistic expectations and pathological families.

Once again the effect of bad news is heightened by the joyous expectations of the season. A father commits suicide with his small children, an earthquake in Iran, a mud slide in California, and three more soldiers are killed by an ambush in Baghdad. Our response to this news is always the same what a terrible thing to happen at Christmas.

I guess the symbol of the Christmas Blues is the child who opened maybe 20 presents and then looks up with sad eyes at his parents and asks, "Is that all?" Expectations never seem to be met at Christmas. Every year there are people who ask the same question, "Is that all? I was expecting more from Christmas. What difference does it make?"

CHRISTMAS DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

I believe that Christmas makes a great deal of difference. The tragedies of the world stand out even more this time of year because they are in stark contrast to the fact that among many people, there really is a sense of hope and happiness.

One of the greatest gifts I receive each year is just shaking your hands after the Christmas Eve service. I love the sense of joy and expectation that always seems to be a part of that service and the way everyone responds to that joy with a smile.

I love Christmas. I love the gift giving and the heartfelt expressions of affection. Perhaps the greatest gift of all was a note a friend wrote, "Thank you for your support and friendship. Without you I couldn't have made it this year."

But, now all that gift giving and well wishing is over. It has to end some time. After all, we couldn't afford this kind of gift giving all year long. Or could we?

Perhaps we could. Perhaps we could afford to give the best gift of all year long and never have to worry about our Master Card bill because the best gifts of all are gifts that come from the heart and not from the wallet.

We could give the gifts of love and concern all year long. We could give the gift of peace and good will in January as well as December. These gifts know no season. Indeed, I feel that these gifts should be given all year long.

When I think back on my life, some of the strongest memories have to do with Christmas. Christmas was always a time of transition. Christmas always did somehow have the ability to change things. I mark the highlights of my life with a string of Christmas memories. Christmas has always made a difference in my life.

ELECTION

For those of us who are Christians, perhaps the change at Christmas is due to an ever deepening appreciation for our unique status before God. Christmas changes things because it's not, at least at its heart, a season that celebrates what human beings can do. It is a season that celebrates what God can do. And that's a message which can bring us hope ... even when the news is bad.

At Christmas we learn that we are special because God has chosen to make us special. The good news of Christmas is that God quite unexpectedly ... chooses to come to us. The Bible tells us that we are God's children. In our lesson for today from Paul's letter to the Colossians, the Christians at that place are called God's "elect" or "God's chosen." (Colossians 3:12)

This is the Christian doctrine of Election, and it is an ever sounding theme throughout the Bible. I believe that the doctrine of Election is God's Christmas present to us. Election is why Christmas makes a difference.

God has chosen us. But why? Why has God chosen us? Because, according to the Scripture, we are "holy and dearly loved." (Colossians 3:12) "Holy" doesn't mean that we are somehow better than others. Holy means that we who are chosen are called by God to do a special job, and that special job is to tell others in word and deed about the love that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Our word gospel means "good news." And the beginning of the gospel is always just that, "news." It is like that song which Presbyterian Harmony sings "Have you hear the story of the baby boy?" It is not a story about what we have done. It's news about what God has done. It is about a gift that God has given, the gift of God's own presence among us in Jesus Christ. And through the Spirit of Christ, that gift keeps on giving. God is still with us not only at Christmas but throughout our lives and beyond our lives.

GRATITUDE

What do we do with such news? How do we respond? By saying "thank you" with our lives. God's gift demands gratitude.

But, gratitude cannot be forced. Sometimes parents trying to teach their children manners will say something like, "Now what do you say?" trying to coax a thank you from a child who has received a gift. But, when we become mature, a thank you doesn't have to be coaxed. We begin to understand the importance of gifts. It is not the gift itself but the love and concern which went into the gift that really makes a difference.

In the same way, we must learn to grow up in our celebration of Christmas. Christmas is not so much about gift giving as it is about gift receiving. Christmas is about learning to be grateful for gifts received. And the greatest gift of all is the gift of God's own presence in Jesus Christ. That gift demands gratitude and reflection and a change in behavior.

All the calls to love and obedience in the Bible are based upon the power of a grateful heart. Let's look at our text, Colossians 3:12 once again. Paul wrote,

[12] Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Col. 3:12 (NIV)

NEW CLOTHES

This passage uses a familiar image in the writings of Paul, the idea that living the Christian life is like putting on a new set of clothes. That's an image we should readily identify with at Christmas. Invariably at this time of the year you'll see someone with a new shirt or dress, and you can safely say, "I bet I know what you got for Christmas." It makes you feel better to put on some new clothes especially when those clothes represent a gift from a loved one.

Well, Paul is telling us that God has given us a new suit of clothes for Christmas as well. God has given us a new suit of behaviors, a new way of acting based upon gratitude gratitude for the love and grace of God that is given us in Christ Jesus.

Our Christmas outfit consists of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Moule's translation of these traits is "ready sympathy, a generous spirit, a humble disposition, and a willingness to make concessions."

All of these traits can be summarized by a phrase we used to use. We used to say that someone had a "big heart."

I think that's a wonderful way to summarize today's lesson. If our lives are filled with joy on account of God's grace in Jesus Christ, we have a big heart.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

I'm told that if our blood vessels aren't elastic enough due to the build up of fatty substances in the blood stream, the life giving flow of blood is impeded and sooner or later that will cause us severe physical problems problems like high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. One way to minimize this problem is to exercise regularly and try to eat foods that are good for us.

Perhaps the same is true in a spiritual sense as well. If we do not expand those things in our life that feed our heart, if we do not allow God's grace to change our behavior, eventually the life giving flow of God's grace will not make it to the center of our spiritual being. We will find ourselves choked off from the very source of life.

But, a person with a "big heart" does not have that problem. He or she exercises the grace that God has given them. Through a changed lifestyle, the grace of God becomes more than just a story that happened long ago or is celebrated once a year at Christmas. The grace of God becomes a practical reality in the lives of people.

This is what it means to put on the clothes of Christmas. It means to have a spirit of thanksgiving which spills over into our attitude toward others. It means being grateful enough for God's care to risk caring for others. It means being so grateful for God's forgiveness that we dare risk forgiving others.

FORGIVE

I'm not one of those folks who make New Year's resolutions because I know that come January 2 if I make it that long the resolution will be broken. This passage is not about making another New Year's resolution. This passage is not about saying, "Lord, this year I'm going to try harder. This year I'm going to do better."

This biblical passage is more realistic than a resolution. This lesson allows for backsliding. This recognizes that we need more than good intentions. This passage, like so many others, reminds us where to turn when things go wrong. It's not that we won't have heartaches and problems this coming year. We will. But, we have the power to deal with those problems. The power to resolve those problems comes from remembering who we are and whose we are. Verse 13 puts it this way, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

This coming year will not be perfect. In fact, it will be, like all other years, far from perfect. But, if we look at the problems and disappointments of the coming year from the vantage point of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the rough spots will not seem so overwhelming. If we are filled with joy and gratitude for what God has first done for us in Christ Jesus, we will be a joyful and forgiving people despite circumstances that are often less than ideal.

When a child has a temper fit, if you react in the same emotional tone, you will only increase the intensity of the emotion. But, if you continue to press the issue in a firm but noncombative way eventually the child will calm down. The same is true in any relationship. It takes two to make a fight, and this passage of Scripture seems to be saying, "We can overcome our differences in a better way. Let's treat each other as mature Christians overlooking the petty squabbles. Let us be willing to compromise and look at all sides of an issue. Let us press firmly but kindly toward the goals we think God wants us to pursue."

SELF-GIVING LOVE

Another way of talking about this generous, forgiving spirit is to talk about love. In verse 14 of today's lesson we read,

[14] And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Col. 3:14 (NIV)

In putting on the new clothes of Christmas, we put on the gloves of compassion, the boots of humility and the wardrobe of forgiveness. But, it's love that makes the outfit complete. Love is what ties it all together. Love is the "overcoat" which describes it all. Love describes not only the nature of God but also the aspirations of God's people. So we are to put on love. Love defines what it means to be a follower of Christ and a child of God. Self-giving love brings harmony to life. Self-giving love brings us closer to God and each other.

PEACE

Such an outfit can only be donned by a willingness to give up control of our lives.

One characteristic that distinguishes Christians is a willingness to give up our lives for the sake of the kingdom. In the New Testament, the followers of Christ are literally described as slaves. But, we are slaves by choice.

As members of the body of Christ we are admonished in Colossians 3:15 to "let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts." Or, to translate that phrase more literally we might say, "Let the peace of Christ act as an umpire in your hearts." The NEB translates, "Let Christ's peace be an arbitrator in your hearts." Peterson comes up with an image which suggests the discipline of a marching band. He translated this verse,

[15] Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing Colossians 3:15

I think the images suggested by these various translations give us a firm grasp on exactly how God planned to make good on that oft repeated but seldom understood phrase “peace on earth good will toward men (and women).”

Peace on earth is not a romantic wish nor is it something that only the end of the world can bring about. Peace on earth is a personal possibility as we let the peace of Christ be the umpire or arbitrator in our lives. Peace on earth becomes a personal possibility when we start singing God’s song instead of humming our own tune, and we march in step to the cadence of God’s drum line.

We all know that to play a game of baseball we have to give the authority to call the game to an umpire otherwise the game would be utter confusion with dispute after dispute. In order to settle labor/management disputes without strikes and confrontations that would be harmful to both the company and the union, quite often a third person, an arbitrator is given the authority to decide what would be a fair decision. Those of us who have played in the marching band know that the key to a good band is discipline. We must all play the same tune and march in disciplined step in order to obtain our goals as a group.

In the same way, we relinquish control of our lives to the peace of Christ. We let Christ determine the rules. We use the life of Christ as way to discover what God wants for our life. We entrust our conflicts and our questions to the peace of Christ. Of course umpires sometimes make mistakes as instant replay often proves. Sometimes bands do not march in step and arbitrators make decisions that are well arbitrary.

But, in the peace of Christ, we have an umpire who doesn’t make mistakes. His decisions are always fair and in tune with the song of the universe. And this is the life that we are called to live. We are called to live a life that is constantly under the influence of Christ.

In verse 15 we read that “we were called to peace.” Peace, the peace of Christ is the special concern of God’s people. The One we follow is known as the Prince of Peace and so that is our guiding principle in life. We are called to pursue peace as he pursued peace peace in our own lives, peace in the lives of those we meet, and most importantly, peace in the world.

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Let’s look at all of verse 15 which reads, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since, as members of one body, you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

Once again we see that at the root of a peaceful person we find an attitude of thanksgiving. Think about the times this season when you felt warm and peaceful. What were you thinking about?

I would guess you were saying to yourself something like this: “My, what a lucky person I am. I have such good friends... such lovely children... my, those grandchildren are something else... I love my home... my church” in other words, the peace came when you gave thanks.

I once heard a sermon (I don’t know where or when) ...and all I remember about it is the title. But the title is a sermon in itself - one word the author coined...”Thanksgiving.” That says that although doesn’t it? To live each day with a big heart...with a heart full of thanksgiving.

Indeed, in the next verse (v. 16) our worship service is seen as a time when Thanksgiving spills over into unrestrained music and encouragement. Verse 16 reads, “Let the word of Christ dwelling you richly as you teach and counsel one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts.”

It is very important to understand why we read Scripture, sing hymns, preach and do all the other things we do in a worship service. It's not just to learn something new or to give a good performance so that others will say: "Oh, what a great choir you have." The purpose of the worship service as a whole is to give us an opportunity to express the gratitude we have toward God for all the many blessings he has given us in Jesus Christ.

There was a person who sang with us in a Christmas cantata one year who was rather unsure of himself musically. He often told me, "I'll just follow your lead. I'm not a very good singer, but I love to make a joyful noise before the Lord." and then he added with a grin, "But that's the whole point of it all - isn't it?" I had to smile and agree for that was the truth not only about singing but also about life in general, the whole point is to make a joyful noise before the Lord.

Notice that Colossians 3:17 takes this gratitude out of the church and into the world: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Have you given thanks for the gifts you've received this season?

Most of us would feel very guilty if we failed to give someone "thank you" in response to a gift. But often we "forget" to say thank you to God for the gift of gifts.

His gift to us is overwhelming. There is nothing that we can give in return. As the hymn writer put it: "were the whole realm of nature mine...that would be a gift far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my love, my all." Indeed it does.

My prayer for all of us this holiday season is that we might dress ourselves in the wardrobe that God has picked out for us. It is a wardrobe consisting of compassion, kindness, forgiveness, peace and love. And we put on all these things with an attitude of gratitude. That's a Christmas outfit which will last the whole year long.

Amen.