

**First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida**  
**Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor**  
**12/28/08**

“What Has Christmas Taught Us?”

Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV)

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

## CHRISTMAS RESOLUTIONS

Do you make New Year's resolutions?

In my family we make Christmas resolutions. I bet you make them too. For example, some of you have said, “Next year we're going home for Christmas and see some snow.” And those of you who went home are saying, “Next year we're going to stay home and enjoy some Florida sunshine for Christmas.”

Perhaps you feel like you spent too much on Christmas this year, and so you say, “Next year I'm going to be more frugal in my approach to Christmas.” Or you can be like the Allens and say, “Next year we're going to be a one family stimulus package to boost the economy!”

As I think back on Christmases past, it has become apparent to me that every year I've made these Christmas resolutions. Every year I've asked, “What have we learned from Christmas? What do we need to change next year?”

This is especially true in the church.

Some of you remember the big brass Advent ring that we used to use. Do you know why we don't use that any more?

Well, first of all it has the complexity of a Rube Goldberg contraption. Hal Neuhard was the only one in the church who could find all the parts and put it together ... and since Hal's in another community now ...

But, there's another more important reason that we changed. One Christmas Eve the Christ candle began to melt down really fast. The flames began to shoot up. And as I

sang the last hymn, basking in the glow of a wonderful Christmas Eve service I caught a glimpse of Tammy Celeste trying to beat out the flame with her choir robe.

Now that is a Christmas memory that will last forever.

And we learned something that year. We weren't going to use that brass Advent stand any more. We weren't going to use hollow candles that might explode in flames during our service. And each week we were going to replace the candles.

## CHRISTMAS LESSONS

All this got me to thinking. What *have* we really learned about Christmas this year? What has Christmas taught us?

Oh, I'm not talking about the trappings of Christmas. I'm not talking about a more efficient or meaningful way to celebrate. I'm talking about Christmas itself. What have we learned about the message of Christmas?

This is the first Sunday after Christmas, an appropriate time to reflect upon what Christmas really means. And it seems to me that our Scripture lesson from Paul's letter to the Colossians summarizes the basic points very well.

## ELECTION

First, the message of Christmas is about the doctrine of Election. Christmas at its heart is not a season that celebrates what human beings can do. It's a season that celebrates what God chooses to do. Salvation comes from upon high, and when that happens, the world is never the same.

That's why majestic hymns play such an important role at Christmas. It gives us a sense that there is good news from upon high. In a figurative sense we do "fall on our knees" as we hear the angel voices.

Christmas is not (at its heart) about children or families or any of those other wonderful traditions that we have come to associate with the season. Christmas is about the presence of God in the world. Christmas is good news that no one could ever expect. God chooses to come to us. God calls us His children.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, the Christians in that place are called God's "elect" or God's "chosen." (Colossians 3:12) This is the doctrine of Election; it is a theme that you will find throughout the Bible. The doctrine of Election is God's Christmas present to us.

If you learn nothing else from our Christmas celebration, learn this. We don't come to God. God comes to us. God has chosen us.

But why ... why has God chosen us? As Mary put it in our lesson last week, "How can this be?" Why would God come to someone like me? He has 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 are chosen by God to do a special job. And that special job is to tell others in word and in deed about the love that is ours in Christ Jesus.

The word gospel means "good news." And we have been chosen by God to be in the good news business. Do you remember the song that the church quartet sang last year? We asked the question in song, "Have you heard the story of the baby boy?" That's spreading the good news.

It's not a story about what we have done. It's a story about what God has done. It's 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.

So the first lesson of Christmas is to look up instead of about. Salvation comes from upon high.

#### GRATITUDE

The second lesson of Christmas is the lesson of gratitude. When someone gives you a gift, what do you say? Our mothers taught us this long ago. We say, "Thank you."

In the same way when we hear the good news of God's indescribable gift, gratitude and praise are the appropriate responses. When someone thinks enough of us to buy us a gift, it changes our relationship with that person.

And in a much greater way when God gave us the greatest gift of all, the gift of his holy presence in Jesus Christ, the world changed forever. That gift changes our relationship with God. It draws us closer to Him and opens up the possibility of a new way of living.

All the calls to love and obedience in the Bible are based upon the power of grateful heart. Let's look at the first verse of our text for today again. Paul wrote, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Colossians 3:12, NIV)

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 that we can identify with at Christmas. Invariably 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 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. God has given us a new set of behaviors, a new way of acting based upon gratitude for the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Our Christmas outfit consists of “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” I like the way one scholar translated these traits, “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 of some people who were especially generous and loving, “That a person has a big heart.”

That’s a wonderful way to summarize today’s lesson. If our lives are filled with joy because of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we will have a big heart. Our life will be filled with love and grace.

#### EXERCISING FORGIVENESS

We’re told that if we don’t eat right and exercise enough, our bodies will suffer. It’s good for our heart to eat right and exercise often. It literally can change who we are and how we feel.

The same is true from a spiritual perspective. God has given us the gift of salvation in his Son, Jesus. But, it is up to us to use that gift. We must feed and exercise our faith. Otherwise the life giving flow of God’s grace will not make it to the center of our being.

How do we feed and exercise our faith? We do it by forgiving others as God has forgiven us.

I was watching the history channel on TV this past week. And they told the story of something called the Christmas truce.

It was Christmas Eve 1914. Opposing armies lay in their trenches, the British and French on one side and the Germans on the other.

No doubt most of those young men didn’t want to be there, and they especially didn’t want to be there on Christmas Eve. They were missing their family and friends terribly.

And a young German soldier began to sing, "Silent night, holy night." Others joined in. When they had finished, the British and French responded with other Christmas carols.

Eventually, the men from both sides left their trenches and met in the middle. They shook hands, exchanged gifts, and shared pictures of their families. Informal soccer

games began in what had been "no-man's-land." And a joint service was held to bury the dead of both sides.

The generals, of course, were not pleased with these events. Men who have come to know each other's names and seen each other's families are much less likely to want to kill each other. War seems to require a nameless, faceless enemy.

So, following that magical night the men on both sides spent a few days simply firing aimlessly into the sky. Then the war was back in earnest and continued for three more bloody years.

Yet the story of that Christmas Eve lingered - a night when the angels really did sing of peace on earth.

## PEACE

So, let's review what we've learned about Christmas thus far. Christmas is a gift from God. We say thank you for that gift by being compassionate and forgiving toward others. And compassion and forgiveness lead to peace. You know about this peace. Every year we say it; peace on earth good will toward men and women.

That's the message of Christmas isn't it?

In Colossians 3:15 we are admonished to "let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts." A literal translation might be, "Let the peace of Christ act as an umpire in your hearts."

Eugene Peterson translates this verse using the image of a marching band, "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 ..."

These images help us interpret that oft repeated but seldom understood phrase, "Peace on earth ... good will toward men (and women)."

Peace on earth is not a romantic wish; peace on earth is not something that only the end of time can accomplish. Peace on earth is a personal possibility when we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

When Christ is the umpire in our life, the right call is always made. When we start singing God's song instead of humming our own tune, we can make beautiful music. When we march in step to God's plan, instead of listening to the sound of our own drummer, we can do great things for the kingdom.

## SINGING THE SONG OF PEACE TOGETHER

Peace on earth can be more than a slogan. It can be a reality. But, we are not strong enough to do it alone. We must help each other along the way.

That's the final lesson that Christmas teaches us. Peace on earth is a group effort. It is not something that we can accomplish on our own. It is something that we do together as we follow the Word of God.

In verse 16 we read,

“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.” (Colossians 3:16, NRSV)

Christmas teaches us that the point of our life together is to proclaim the word of God. That is the point of our music. That is the point of our teaching. That is the point of our preaching. It is all about the message of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

That is the purpose that should drive the church. That is the hope that inspires us. That is our reason for being here today.

I think that often we forget that. The church (like our country) sometimes becomes divided into special interest groups who think that their particular problem or need is the greatest. Instead of pulling together and encouraging one another we divide up into competing groups who proclaim that it is our way or the highway.

But, the message of Christmas pulls us together. At Christmas we are reminded that it's not about our words. It's about the Word of God that comes from upon high. It's not about creating our own kingdom. It's about the kingdom that comes.

All of us lose our way when it comes to God's kingdom. All of us get bogged down in the day to day details and forget about the big picture. And so we are called to “admonish one another in all wisdom.”

We are called to sing the songs of faith. We are called to remember the reason for the season.

Christmas is such a familiar season, and yet I have found that each year Christmas teaches me something new about the kingdom of God. The age old story of hope and faith rekindles my own faith.

When we sing the old carols they have a new life and new power. Something old becomes something new. I discover each year that the word of God is a powerful, life-giving word of faith and hope.

One commentator asked,

“When we come before God in worship, why do we sing rather than merely think or talk with one another?”

She answered, “Singing is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, greatest joys, and most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally.”

At Christmas more than at any other time of the year this is especially true. The music of Christmas has the power to bind us together and change things. The music of Christmas has the power to remind us of truths that are too deep for words.

Someone asked me again why we don’t clap in the Presbyterian Church. We jokingly suggested that if he dared to clap in a Presbyterian Church an usher would come and remove him by force from the building! (That’s not true by the way.)

But, there’s a reason we don’t clap. Clapping tends to point us in the wrong direction.

The words and the music are not about us and our performance. They are about God and God’s promises. They are not designed so that we can look about and see the glory of men and women. They are designed to point our hearts and minds heavenward and see the glory of God.

The appropriate response to such a message is not to clap but to get up out of our trenches and work for peace and justice here and now. That’s what Christmas teaches us and the coming year will be an opportunity to put it into practice.

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