

Shorter New Testament Letters
Colossians: “Ways to Make Christianity Healthy”

“Remember that the Separate Self is the Problem”

Colossians 3:1-17

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Scripture

¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Creator through him.

Colossians 3:1-17 | NIV

Introduction

1. The Washington Post produces a weekly email distribution called “The Optimist.”¹ It always arrives in my email on Sunday morning during our church service and while I never get to read it when it arrives I have come to recognize the link between the “Optimist” news feed and Sunday worship, and it is this: “connection.” Some “Optimist” headlines include:

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/?wpisrc=nl_optimist&wpmm=1 (accessed 5-5-18)

- “A blind dachshund and his guide dog were adopted and separated....”



This is how they were reunited.”

- “These teens saw how poor mental health hurt their peers.



So they got a law passed.”

- “This mother read about a 4-year-old’s mysterious death.



A year later, it saved her own daughter’s life.”

- “Florida beachgoers form 80-person human chain...”



...to rescue a family swept away by riptide.

- “A man nearly jumped off an overpass. 13 truckers made a safety net.”²



The last story tells of a nearly four-hour ordeal where truckers one by one voluntarily parked their trucks under the overpass until the man considering suicide agreed to walk off the bridge and get medical help. These stories and other such inspirational accounts speak to a truth: The Creator of all things has embedded the idea into our human consciousness that we feel most alive and highly purposeful when we are connected to and helping one another, all living things, and ultimately, *all* created things.

2. We are nearing the end of our six week teaching series on the New Testament letter to the Early Christian Church in Colossae— an agricultural town located on the southern bank of the Lycus River in the territory of Phrygia (modern Turkey), about 110 miles east of Ephesus.³ We have named this short series “Ways to Make Christianity Healthy” because of both the unique contribution this letter would have made in the first Century to the fledging Christian movement, and because of the ways it still helps the Christian movement today.
3. Many Christians in our time acknowledge that our religious movement is adrift from its core purpose and mission—the core mission of reminding everyone everywhere that in and through the unique work of Christ they are loved by God and connected to one another, and, are to love God and love one another across human difference because of the profoundly sacred deposit of God in everyone and everything.

Christian religion in America is going through a uniquely chaotic and reforming time because of how some segments of our movement are actually increasing fear and fracture in our society rather than intervening and disrupting the cycles of violence with Christ’s message of compassion, mercy, justice and reconciliation. The striking gap between Christians and the Christ has led many to simply walk away from church and religion. Others, though, are on a quest and journey of inquiry to discern how we got to this moment and what parts of our Christian theology and tradition have failed us, or at a minimum left us ill-equipped to live as healthy Christ followers in this time and place.

4. Today’s Scripture helps us in a few important ways. First, it points out that the Christ centered life *is the connected life*. And, second, that the connected life *is a life of love that God has designed since the beginning of creation itself*.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/04/24/a-man-nearly-jumped-off-an-overpass-13-truckers-made-a-safety-net/?utm_term=.6114190526fa&wpisrc=nl_optimist&wpmm=1 (accessed 5-5-18)

³ David Garland, Colossians/Philemon The NIV Application Commentary. Page 17.

Let's first look at the Christ centered life as the connected life.

A. The Christ Centered Life is the Connected Life

1. Colossians 3:1-11 is framed around the high level archetypal idea of Christ followers imitating Christ, as in the sacrament of Christian baptism and for the sake of love, to “die, being resurrected, and fully identify *with Christ*.” As we discussed in Colossians chapter one—Christ is center and to be imitated in belief and practice.

³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry...also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Colossians 3:3-5, 8b-17 | NIV

When we read the death and resurrection framing language that Paul used it is important to consider these metaphorical points in very practical terms and through personal developmental and spiritual growth lenses. In doing so we will learn over time that it is essential to let go of that which harms us in as much as it *separates us* from others and God. Paul went so far as to say this including harm and separation across religion, culture, and socio-economic standing. In every way, living the holy life is living the lovingly connected life.

2. Interestingly, and telling as to why Christian religion is struggling so much in an increasingly diverse and globally connected world—this is a very different principled path of holiness than what some parts of Christian religion put forward as the best path of holiness. Some have taught that holiness is personal moral perfection including profound separateness from others.

On a continuum, there are some who say you can achieve moral perfection this side of death and there are others who say you can never be perfect, but you simply need to try for all of your life anyway because the message inherent in this is that God will love you more, the more perfect you are. And, at either end of this particular holiness theology continuum, perfection and performance against layers and layers of systematic and theological frameworks about God and the human experience are demanded with exacting precision and threat of exclusion.

3. The problems here are many. At the risk of generalizing, the first would be the sense that you are being asked to live in a doom loop hamster wheel of never meeting God's expectations nor one another's approval. The second is that holiness framed in these terms makes an implicit commitment of the spiritual formation pathway to a meritocracy-reward-and-punishment-based understanding of God's relationship to the creation.

4. In contrast to this, the Covenant and pietistic formational practice of holiness that we talk about often around here seeks a different principled path that is summarized in one of the six statements we crafted together in our teaching series “Why We Gather.”

Personal Transformation

With God’s assisting presence we make a conscious effort to develop our own bodies, minds and spirits. We do this by transforming the separate self, balancing the inward and outward journeys, allowing failure and woundedness to be primary teachers, and accepting reality as paradoxical and complementary.

Let me repeat one small part of this: We do this by transforming “the separate self”...

5. What is the separate self? Jesus called the separate self our “old wineskin.”⁴ It’s our false ego that hates change and judges, splits, labels and locks down many things into unhelpful social contracts that were given to us by our cultural, family, and sometimes religious (or non-religious) groups, forged over time and for the purpose of boundarying ourselves or our group from others for either safety or superiority, or both.

The Star Tribune ran a story today titled “In some Minnesota Cities, welcome turns into a fighting word.”⁵ The article covered the ongoing struggle for Minnesota and the Upper Midwest to become a more multi-cultural and inclusive region. The sad reality is that much of the conversations are battle grounds framed typically by most city councils passing inclusive resolutions and some citizens pushing back with rhetoric like a resident of Grand Forks North Dakota who said in a meeting: “many citizens believe that our relative homogeneity...is among the areas greatest assets.”⁶

6. Jesus and Paul taught a different way. Jesus taught that holiness is ultimately about intimacy and connectedness to God and others. And that offering ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, is offer ourselves to the love of God and neighbor. This includes looking at our everyday life (trips to the grocery store, relationships at work, family conflicts, discussions about societies most difficult conflicts) and making incremental movements away from our false, separate, and boundaried self, through letting go and in some cases putting to death our false ego and unhelpful social contracts that taught us to fear.
7. We do not need to download God’s perfect will on this whole matter from some dropbox in the sky...We have it in Jesus and the distillation of truth through thoughtful discernment of Scriptures. Also, God is found in our daily lives, and God’s good, pleasing and perfect will is that, as Christ modelled for us, we are free and compelled to love and care for everyone and everything. *That* is the narrow path! In Matthew chapter 5-7 and in the sermon on the mount Jesus described the narrow path and what it means to “be perfect like God is perfect” in the context of God’s radical generosity and our love of even our enemies. As opposed to the kind of “narrow path” sometimes described in separatist and sectarian Christian religion as the line where comparatively few of only those who behave the best get in, and billions upon billions are lost to oblivion.

⁴ Mark 2:21-22.

⁵ <http://www.startribune.com/welcoming-or-wary-minnesota-cities-weigh-their-approach-to-newcomers/481837471/> (accessed 5-6-18)

⁶ IBID.

The narrow path is the generous path and its narrow because it is so challenging and sometimes dangerous difficult to walk in the face of prejudice, fear and religious and human tribalism. No wonder Jesus went out of his way to point out that the greatest two commandments on which all others hang is loving God and loving neighbor and that we will be blessed if we suffer for the sake of his generous name.

8. Connectedness and inter-dependence are the formational standard and probably why, in Jesus' ministry, he consistently invited people in and toward belonging. He would heal someone, and tell them to report to the local priests so they could return to the community. He would point out hypocrisy to hold the legalists at bay because legalists are always looking for ways to kick people out of community.

In relationship to today's Scripture and what Paul called "the old self and its practices"—Jesus recognized sin as its own punishment and admonished people to sin less to avoid its corrosive effects on their lives. And, here is the extra good news that's captured nicely in a famous quote by Canadian artist Leonard Cohen: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."⁷ With great irony, in Christ, holiness (on top of all that we have discussed) is a path that recognizes darkness, failure, relapse, woundedness and death as our *primary teachers* because they intensely invite us toward inter-dependence with God and one another.

And, the glue that connects and holds Christ to us, and us to Christ and others is *love*.

B. The Connected Life is a Life of Love

1. Paul wrote in today's text:

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Colossians 3:12-14 | NIV

This is an exquisite passage of Scripture. And, counter to some of the more sectarian parts of Christian religion, some Christ followers live it out exquisitely. The Star Tribune article I mentioned earlier ended its story by highlighting the work of Tim Sackett...⁸



⁷ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/leonard_cohen.html (accessed 11-12-16)

⁸ Photo and content taken from: <http://www.startribune.com/welcoming-or-wary-minnesota-cities-weigh-their-approach-to-newcomers/481837471/> (accessed 5-5-18)

...chaplain of Transport for Christ, a chapel in a semi-trailer in Hudson, Wisconsin. He runs a national ministry for truckers and attends meeting of both sides of the battle in Hudson. "Inclusion Alliance" on one side and "Citizens for the St Croix Valley" on the other. Tim Sackett was quoted for the article by saying, "I'm interested in a quote that says, 'If you've been the most fortunate or if you have plenty, then you should build a longer table, not a higher fence...The Inclusion Alliance, they want to build a longer table, and the concerned Citizens, they want to build a higher fence...I think there should be a way to have a sit-down...'"

2. Setting aside the civil-political fray and turning toward personal growth—I find that when I work on such things in my day to day life, I learn and acquire the virtues Paul speaks of most in my failures and foibles. And, while seeking to embody these virtues of connection and true self I end up needing them being given to me even more than I can give them to others.
3. It was a recent moment of great irony that proved this again only a week and a half ago during my annual review with the chair of First Covenant, Carina Aleckson. One of my growth edges that I spoke of in my review was that I would continue to be more fully present in meetings and less distracted by the technological work tendrils of my phone and computer. So, for sure, when doing my annual review, I was going to be especially attentive with computer away and phone down.

About 30 minutes into the conversation I turned my phone over to check our time and I noticed that my wife Holly had called, but said to myself "nope, I'm not going to check text messages or step away, I'm sure it's just our regular afternoon check in." About fifteen minutes later I checked the time again, and this time my phone showed that Holly had called four times and left about six text messages saying "where are you?" "Please call me" "Walker has broken his leg" (Walker is our oldest son).

Yep, in the single most concentrated moment of me doing my best to be fully present, I should have paid closer attention to my technology that was connecting me to my family in an emergency. You gotta' love all that we have in our lives that can be good or bad depending upon any given moment of any given day. And, we need to appreciate that whether we live in the 11th century, 21st century, or 31st century—the ways that we work on being our truest and most connected and holy selves may change in forms but will never change in substance.

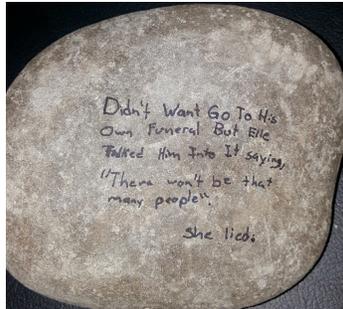
Our best effort is to remember that the separate self is the problem and that which leads to unhealthy Christian religion and unhealthy lives...and to remember to commit ourselves to the path of holiness that is the path of loving connectedness.

Conclusion

1. There are about twenty of us at First Covenant who are participating in a beautiful spiritual formation class intensive being led by Pastor Todd Bratulich and Carma Gjerning titled, "Finding Me." We have been exploring four essential questions that form the basis of how we engage with God, ourselves and our world: 1) Who am I? 2) What do I love? 3) Knowing I will die, how do I want to live? And 4) What is my gift to the world? Through conversation, teaching, and guided spiritual practices, we have been digging into what it means to live as the beloved of God.

2. Last Tuesday we worked with the question “Knowing I will die, how do I want to live?” We were invited to imagine what the end of our lives would look like such that we were more healthfully awake and living more alive today. One of the exercises was writing on rocks what we would want to have on our tombstones. Some had really long reflections and others more brief. Chams Chamberlain gave me permission to share what he wrote on his stone.

And, for background, Chams, a true introvert, is married to Elle Harris a very outgoing person. Chams tells me that he savors solitude and a limited amount of experiences that force extroversion, like participating in a “Finding Me” class that asks us to reveal what we would put on our tombstone to others! Chams is a great sport...and took a picture of his rock for me to share today:



“Didn’t want to go to his own funeral but Elle talked him into it saying ‘There won’t be many people.’ She lied.

3. Even in the most introverted of us somehow knows that connection is essential.

And, this beautiful reflection of connectedness transcending personality type is a lesson for us—we live in an entirely relational universe. And, Christ followers follow Christ’s pattern of letting go of the false and separate self and putting on the true and connected self to join the God-infused life flow that is moving through us, with us, and in us, just as Jesus taught, is living every day, as Paul concluded in today’s text, “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Creator through him.

The Christ centered life is the connected life...and, the connected life is a life of love. This will make and keep Christianity healthy in our time.

Prayer

God of all, Jesus Christ, Incarnation of God, and Holy Spirit sustainer of life—Three in One--we pray that you work alongside and within us in our day to day decisions to become personally transformed toward our true and lovingly connected selves. In the mystical convergence of body, soul, and mind we pray for you to give us the mind of Christ and love for all things. We pray for the patience to resist judging and dividing unnecessarily. And, when remaining lovingly connected to others and all things comes with an exacting cost—we choose to remain and pay that price with clarity and freedom that honors the depth of our deepest convictions.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Benediction

As our week begins, may we see loving connectedness to all things as the guiding principle of holiness for those made alive in Christ.

Go in Peace. Amen.