

## WE, THE PEOPLE

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto  
August 7, 1983

Colossians 3:12-17

We are concluding today the series of sermons from the letter to the Colossians on the basics of our faith. Actually, the lectionary suggested passages concluded last week with the list of destructive attitudes and actions and Paul's violent appeal to "put them to death". But, I couldn't see concluding with the destructive when the next list of attitudes and actions in Colossians are those that indicate the presence of God, the reign of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Listen to the list of qualities present in the church when it is a church: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, tolerant of one another, forgiving of one another, love, peace and thanksgiving. Now that is a list worth pursuing.

But, too often this list -- these attitudes and actions -- are presented as "heavy trips laid upon us." They are often presented to us with the finger pointing, "You should be compassionate, kind, loving, etc." So when we fail, we feel even more guilty. I've heard too many sermons, admonitions from Sunday School teachers, platitudes from chairpersons telling me I should, I ought, to be patient, forgiving, etc. And my guilty heart cries with Paul, "I do what I shouldn't, and I don't do what I should." I have a friend who cries, "Don't 'should' on me." When someone tells him what he should do, he resists being "should upon". We love to tell others what to do and to make them feel guilty.

In our admonishing of one another to behave more loving, in our "shoulding" on one another, we forget the context in which Paul places this list here in Colossians. The context is crucial, for it is only in the larger setting, can the realization of these qualities in the church be achieved.

Paul realizes that compassion, love, patience, etc., are accompanying fruits, results, spin-offs of a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. Colossians 3:12, "You are the people of God." That is the context in which the list is placed. That is the basis upon which we relate to one another in the church. We, the people of God...

The fundamental psychological need of every human being is to belong. We are social beings and are driven to find where we fit, where we belong. The Bible labels the estrangement, separation of people from people and from God, "sin". We all live in sin and desperately seek to overcome it by belonging somewhere, even if it is negatively. A misbehaving child is saying, "If I'm bad, at least they will notice me." To receive discipline is at least being noticed and negative attention is better than no attention.

A universal feeling of human beings is loneliness, which is difficult to overcome. Someone has said, "Loneliness wouldn't be so hard to fight, if I didn't have to do it all by myself." Do you remember being lonely, homesick? Do you remember feeling out of place? I remember the first time I was away from home. I suppose I was 11 or 12 years old and attending a 4-H event. This was my first time away from my parents, my comfortable home on the farm, my small town school. I was afraid to talk to anyone. I was lost, out of place and miserable. I remember walking with a group of boys, probably to the dining hall or to a meeting. My socks were loose and worked their way down into my shoes. My feet were uncomfortable but I didn't dare stop to pull up the socks because I was sure they didn't know I was there and so would walk on without me. So I walked in misery. Then I overheard a kid behind me say to one next to him, "Hey, look at that guy. He wears his socks down in his shoes!" I was mortified and looked for a hole to crawl into.

It is not pleasant to feel out of place and homesick. Actually we all feel somewhat restless and out of place, because this earth is really not our home. Our home is in heaven. Our home is in God. That is where we belong, and the closest relationship on this earth is the church. We are the people of God.

Continuing in verse 12, Paul writes, "God loved you and chose you for his own." God picked you, selected you, because God wants you in his family, and loves you. God so loves you that his son, Jesus, died to show you how deeply God feels about you. We celebrate Holy Communion this morning, remembering how Jesus suffered and died. We not only remember but we experience Christ in this sacrament. We gather not as individuals but as the people of God. We come as a family to God's table. We come as children, young, middle-aged and older. We come in all shapes and sizes. We come as we are, not pretending to be anyone else. We come because God loves us, Jesus died for us, and we are the people of God.

This is the context in which love, compassion, kindness, patience may be nurtured, grow and flourish in our midst. We are not individuals trying so hard to be nice to one another, but we are the people of God, centered in Christ, experiencing the Holy Spirit, acting better than we believed possible. In verse 13, Paul writes, "forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you." Remember the many times God forgave you. Remember how understanding God is of you. Remember how patient God is with you. Can you do less to someone else?

"You are the people of God; God loved you and chose you for his own. So then, clothe yourselves, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, be tolerant of one another, forgive one another, be loving and thankful." And the peace of Christ will fill your hearts. Come to the table of Communion this morning expecting to receive. Come, honestly with your confession of sin. Come, celebrating with thanksgiving and joy, for we are the people of God.

"WE, THE PEOPLE"

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

DOUGLAS NORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 7, 1983