

“Chosen to Belong”

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How many of you watched the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” during the Christmas season? For as long as I can remember it has been shown numerous times around Christmas. What accounts for its popularity? Inspired writing, well-drawn characters, talented actors, all played a part. But I think there’s something more. I think that movies like “It’s a Wonderful Life” and television shows like “The Andy Griffith Show,” and many of the sit-coms, tap into a deep human longing for community. They all show us people who care about each other, who accept one another in spite of their many failings and frailties and idiosyncrasies, people who share an emotional bond, who are committed to one another. Some more recent television shows reflect this attitude, this need, in their theme songs. One example is Cheers. Just listen to a few lines from its theme song:

Cheers

Making your way in the world today takes everything you’ve got;
Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.
Wouldn’t you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name,
And they’re always glad you came; You want to be where you can see,
Our troubles are all the same; You want to be where everybody knows your name.

Is that what we all want? People who care about us? People who are glad when we show up? People who will support us and stand by us in the bad times, People who will accept us instead of criticizing and judging us? People we can just be ourselves around? I want that. I need that. And so do you. So do we all.

Well, I’ve got some news for you. Good news and bad news. The bad news is that these versions of community, are pretend. They exist only in scripted, staged, theatrical productions. People love those shows, they tune in every week by the millions, because they desperately want to be a part of that kind of community. They see something in those characters’ relationships with one another that they want. But it’s not really real. The good news is that it can be real. The good news is that there is a place where that kind of community can exist. And that place is the church.

Am I describing reality? Let me put it another way. That’s the kind of place that the church should be, the kind of place the church can be, the kind of place that Jesus Christ intended His church to be. But is that the case? You and I know that too often we don’t achieve that ideal. We have to recognize that when many people think of an accepting, loving, supportive, place to be real, to just be themselves, the first place that pops into their mind may not be the church.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians describes Christians as the chosen ones called to be in the one body. Paul was describing a community of believers. How can we continue to grow into the kind of people who are unified in their love for one another and in their love for Christ? People who show their love for one another by the way they relate to one another – not just on Sunday morning, but every day of the week. Let’s take a look at what Paul had to say.

What does it feel like to be chosen? When we were children we frequently wondered how soon we would be chosen to play in a game, or if we would be chosen at all. As adults we anxiously await the outcome of a job interview or a call from the church nominating committee. Would we be chosen? I personally was very glad and excited when this church, or at least a majority of you, decided to call

me as your associate pastor. It was very meaningful to me to be given the chance to serve the Lord by ministering in this community of faith. So, generally speaking, being chosen is a good thing.

Paul proclaims to the Christian community at Colossae that they were God's chosen, holy, and beloved people. In verse 10 of Chapter 3, Paul tells the people that they have stripped off the old self with its destructive, sinful practices and put on the new self which is in the image of the creator. Their new self is part of a new community that is seeking to move from the darkness of sin into the light of life in Christ. For Paul, morality is a matter of what sort of person one becomes in Christ, when one "puts on" the capacity for doing the good that God has willed. Through God's love and undeserved mercy and forgiveness,(his grace), believers are transformed into people who accept God's gift of forgiveness and have the character to do God's will.

Paul called on the believers in verse 12 to "clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience;" attributes which were probably not fully appreciated or embraced by their society or ours. Paul saw the moral result of salvation in the life of God's people as personal holiness reflected in a healthy, Christ-centered community. (Radiance?)

It seems that the dominant cultural message bombarding us each and every day is the command to seek personal, self-fulfillment at any cost. Each person deserves to have everything they want, right now. We are encouraged to use our physical, spiritual, and intellectual gifts to fill our every want, not just our needs. Ravi Zacharias, in his book *Deliver Us From Evil*, uses the character Dorian, from Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to illustrate what happens to a life that is centered on unrestrained self-indulgence and self-centeredness. Dorian is an extremely handsome young man. An artist paints his picture and Dorian becomes captivated by his own good looks. He decides to use his gifts in the pursuit of total pleasure. He asks an appropriate power to assure that any physical degradation or scarring brought about by his life-style will be inflicted upon the painting, not his body. His body will remain handsome and young. He begins to indulge in every kind of pleasure, both moral and immoral. One day he looks at the painting and is horrified to see how hideous and disfigured it has become as a result of his sin. He hides the picture in an attempt to hide his sin. As it would happen, the artist sees the picture, and knowing what it means he confronts Dorian. The artist tries to convince Dorian to repent. In a fit of rage Dorian stabs and kills him. Time passes and Dorian is unable to stand the indictment of the picture. He takes the very knife he had used to kill the artist and thrusts the blade into the picture in an attempt to destroy it. The painting returns to its original beauty, but Dorian himself lays stabbed on the floor, dead. The ravages that had disfigured the picture had transferred to Dorian's body. He was so disfigured that he was unrecognizable to the servants that heard him cry out and rushed in to help.

Zacharias raises a question that this story may lead you to ask, "Can an individual or society live with total disregard for moral and spiritual values and not suffer from the wounds of wickedness?" Paul tells us that the way to true fulfillment is through belief in Jesus Christ. Our belief will lead us not to evil and immoral behavior, but to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Let me repeat that. Our belief will lead us not to evil and immoral behavior, but to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We will be delivered from death and given new life, new clothes, a new self.

Dorian pursued self-centered, destructive pleasure at every opportunity and found only distress and death. The lifestyle which he thought would bring contentment and happiness only brought grief and pain. His rejection of forgiveness and love doomed him to a life of isolation and deceit. In verse 15, Paul invites the Colossians to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful." Our personal relationship with Christ will empower us to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience while enabling us to live in community,

the one body, by practicing love and forgiveness. Our personal relationship with Christ, and belonging to the Christian community, allows the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts.

The Jewish people understood the heart to be the center of the will. A person's entire life was guided by what took place in the heart. If the peace of Christ rules the heart then every decision we make and every action we take will have the quality of peace. Paul expresses this prayer for peace as a community prospect: as members of one body we are called to peace. Peace must characterize our relationships with one another. As our relationship with Christ deepens, he will transform us. Changes within us and between us are our witness; people become convinced that the gospel is true when they see its fruit in the life of believers and the church. Our renewed personal relationship with Christ and the reconciled relationships we experience and witness within the faith community will demonstrate God's triumph over the evil that confronts us. Christ is the giver of peace; he is the prince of peace.

Each of our hearts guides us in our daily living. Our walk with the Lord is a personal experience, but it also expresses itself through the life of the Christian community to which each of us belongs. God has chosen us to belong to him and to experience life with his people. Verse 16 instructs us to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." That just has a good ring to it doesn't it? It emphasizes that the word of Christ has value and that it is worth taking into our lives. Not for just a few minutes, but for a long time. It is to dwell with us, live, with us. We are to savor the word of Christ. Paul is careful to ground the community's teaching and life in the word of Christ.

When a career in business or sports begins to flounder, or a student is stumped by a problem in math or science, what advice might be offered to help them recover? Sometimes people are told to try something totally new, to utilize their creativity and genius. That might work some of the time. Most of the time people are advised to return to the basics, the fundamentals. I think that is what Paul is telling the Colossians. *The Interpreter Bible Commentary* describes the required action as getting back to your true center, the word of Christ.

"Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom." Paul tells the Colossians, and us, don't rely completely on your personal wisdom. Help one another. Get back to the center of your religious instruction and moral education. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit seek the truth of Christ. The church community is uniquely suited to help individuals and families as they grapple with the issues of our times. The Jews have a wonderful perspective on the importance of incorporating faith into daily life. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 declares, Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. In other words, remember the Lord in all that you do and say. Make God the center of your life.

Our perspective on the "hot button" issues of our day and the dilemmas of daily life must be determined by the word of Christ. I hope we will let the word of Christ dwell in us and serve as our guide while we seek to learn and share the wisdom of his Word.

As we journey through life with other Christians, studying God's word, learning about the faith, and applying it in our lives, how do we stay in touch with God? Paul writes, "and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God."

Paul tells us that worship reinforces teaching and admonition. Worship is a spontaneous and uncontrollable need when Christ is at the center of our life. When the word of Christ dwells in us richly, we can experience true worship. Our response to God is marked by gratitude for God and what he is doing in creation. Worship enables us to maintain our spiritual centeredness. Worshipping with other believers and seekers must bring us into intimate communion with the Holy Spirit and other worshippers. Paul told the Colossians to sing songs with gratitude in your hearts. He was speaking to all Colossians, the entire community. The community is to lift its voices in praise and gratitude to God. Worship strengthens the community of believers. We draw strength from each other as we sing the songs of faith and listen to their stories.

The reference to hearts in this verse also links the community's experience of shalom, peace, mentioned in verse 15, with its worship of God. Worship is a response from the community to God, not a ritual demanded by God of the community. Worship is our faith family's interpretation of and response to our heartfelt experience of divine love. The gratitude that we express to God reflects our collective and personal response to the grace of God which is expressed in our teaching and admonishment, and celebrated in our singing and other acts of worship. Paul reminds us that worship is a time for gratitude that God has extended his grace to us and for focusing on the peace, word, and spirit of Christ.

The text shows us that all that we know and do should be Christ centered. Everything is possible because of Christ and his love for us. Since Christ is at the center of our life, our actions must reflect his actions and express gratitude to the Lord for all that he has done. **Verse 17 Concludes the text.** "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

"Whatever you do" is very general: Paul is allowing us to apply this for ourselves.

"Whatever you do" can mean many things, from suffering to praising, from giving to taking.

"Whatever you do, whether it be to love God or love your neighbor. Whether it be putting on a heart of compassion and kindness, and love; or forgiving your brother and sister in Christ.

"Whatever you do, let the word of Jesus richly dwell within you, do so in the name of Jesus. The name that means everything.

As we start the new year let's put on the new clothes that Christ has promised us. Let's covenant together as a faith family, as a community of faith, to support and love one another and to diligently and faithfully seek the Lord's will for each of us and his church. Always remembering that we have been "Chosen to Belong" to our Lord and savior Jesus Christ and to his church. God has chosen us to live together in harmony in the body of Christ.

Let us determine in our hearts, to respond to God's choosing by responding to others with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Let us determine in our hearts, to respond to God's choosing by responding to others with love.

Let us determine in our hearts, to respond to God's love, by letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and, therefore, our lives.

Let us determine in our minds, to let the word of Christ richly dwell within us, by meditating on it, memorizing it, learning from it. We have been "Chosen to Belong," let us be true to our calling.

And all of this, do in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Amen.