

October 24, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

Come Together: As Family
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Colossians 3:12–16

Common English Bible

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Do you have a crazy uncle? I wouldn't say my uncle Gible is crazy but he makes me laugh. He always gets my sister and I confused, calling me her name and vice versa. He says we look alike so it is understandable. We all have crazy uncles in our families. Maybe not an uncle per se, but a family member that is, well, different to say the least. They speak and everyone goes, "Huh?"

Last Sunday we had Children's Sunday and the children did an amazing job leading us in worship. Afterwards two of our kindergarteners kept giving me notes that they had written during worship. One of the notes said, "church is my family." That's an important truth for us to remember. We are the family of God. We all belong. That goes for the crazy uncles or aunts in our church family as well. Like all families we have people who are different. We do not choose who is part of God's family. God does. Our responsibility is to love one another.

When our families don't have what we need, we have to find a family of choice. In one month many people will be having a Friendsgiving instead of a family Thanksgiving. Sometimes you have to take your blessings from other places than your family. There is this great lie that everyone has this perfect family and it is perpetuated by Thanksgiving and Christmas. We see movies of families gathered around big tables with people laughing and having fun. I remember as a child of divorce being in the car at noon on Christmas to go from one parent's house to another. I have a vivid memory of being at a stop light, looking over and seeing another car with a parent driving and a child in the backseat. I wondered if she was taking part in the noon change from one parent's house to another.

As a family of faith, we live and love and worship together, and we all continue to seek God's direction on how to live faithfully as Christians in this time and place. We know what God wants us to do. We are to battle injustice, to look out for the vulnerable - orphans, immigrants, widows, and those who experience bigotry and violence. We are to give sacrificially. You are a family of faith that loves each other, prays for one another, has grieved the loss of loved ones together and has worked side by side to transform our city and world with the love of Jesus. It is our greatest witness to the world.

In our scripture we hear how we are to act towards other people, how to behave as a Christian. We are to be people who embody compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, and thanksgiving. When we do life in that way, we are people who know what life is actually about and we seek to live into what it means to be God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. We create a community that lives in harmony governed by the peace of Christ.

There was recently a 60 minutes interview with the Facebook whistleblower that talked about the Facebook algorithm. Facebook optimizes for content that gets engagement, a reaction, and Facebook's own research is showing that content that is hateful, divisive and polarizing is

easier to inspire people to anger than it is to other emotions. Anger is enticing to people and keeps them on the platform.¹

It is so easy for us to feel anger and fear instead of peace. Fear of changing, fear of not changing, fear of not having any new people at church, fear of having new people at church; fear of death and fear of the life to which you were called. Put on compassion, with kindness, humility gentleness and patience. Be tolerant with each other, forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive in the same way God has forgiven us. Put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Just as we hopefully don't walk out of our homes without clothes, we are called never to leave home without putting on our love for each other and our love for our neighbor. When I get dressed in the morning, I think about what I'm going to be doing that day. I think about who I'm going to see that day. Was I wearing that outfit the last time we met? I wonder what the weather is going to be like and I think about how cold or hot the room I'm going to be in is likely to be. It doesn't take more than a minute or two, but I think about all of those things every day, because whatever I decide to put on is going to be seen by every single person I encounter throughout the day. People I know and people I don't know will see me.

This is what we hear the writer telling the Colossians to do. Get dressed so that you look like a follower of Christ. Every morning, wake up and choose to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Above all else, put on love. If you chose to dress yourself with these clothes each day, that is what every person you interact with will see. They will see Christ in you.

When I want to get dressed in the morning, I have to get up out of my warm, comfy bed, gather the clothes I want to wear and put them on. It doesn't happen automatically. We don't know how to get dressed when we are born either. It's something we have to learn. We have to learn how to button our buttons, how to put our shirt on with the tag in back, how to tie our shoes.

In order to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and above all, love, it takes more than just our strength and intentionality. It takes practice and it requires divine intervention. We have to wake up every day and ask for God's help that God may speak through us and in us.

These clothes are meant to be seen by everyone we meet. And when we can put on those pieces of clothing, we affect the world around us, little by little, inch by inch. Sometimes our lives in Christ feel like life and love and everything is good, great, and life-giving and joyful. Other times, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness are more of a burden than life-altering possibilities. Sometimes we do a loving thing not because it feels good but because love calls on us to do it.

I have a good friend who participates in a prison ministry called Kairos. The incarcerated men who go through Kairos are called men in white because they all have to wear white at that particular prison. When the volunteers go into the prison, they have intentionally been in months of training. They are going in with the expressed purpose of demonstrating Christ's love, so that the men in white might know that Jesus loves them. They know the men in white aren't perfect, and they go ready to be patient and listen intently. They aren't looking to get anything from them. It is all about showing the men in white abundant grace and love. They have spent so much time praying for the men in white that listening to them and loving them is easy. My friend says

¹ <https://twitter.com/60minutes/status/1444810664502079491?s=21>

that the hard part is to treat everyone that she sees in the world as she would treat one of the men in white.

During closing prayer every night in the prison, my friend says she tries to consciously look around at the diverse group of people holding hands with one another. They probably don't agree on much, but they agree about their love for Jesus and their belief that God loves all people no matter what.

Every day a challenge will come. It may be a difficult person, a problem you don't know how to solve, a moment of fear, a great temptation. It might be our first instinct to go into fix-it mode and try to address the challenge on our own. Or we might give in to the temptation and have a short fuse with someone. But, the more we practice making God an active part of our everyday life, the more likely we are to start asking for God's help in those crucial moments of struggle. In those moments of difficulty, we have to cry out for God's help.

A wise pastor once said, "The longer I live, the more I respect gentleness and the less I respect swagger."² Imagine if people saw us talking openly and honestly with one another about our disagreements with such tenderness and respect and gentleness that they were left thinking about how much we love one another. As Christians we go against the culture in so many ways, we travel to far places on mission trips, we show up to homeless shelters and protest rallies, we practice faithfulness in our relationships, we cough up cash for the offering plate, and maybe we even put a fish-shaped ornament on the back of our car as a way to show that we are willing to be different for the sake of the faith we claim.³

In our world today, we need to practice gentleness with one another more than ever. Creating beauty instead of outrage and critiquing policies instead of people. Polarization does not have to become our new common language. We are called to create space for dialogue, to be curious, to listen to someone with whom we disagree. I want to invite you to use some phrases like, tell me more about that. I'm listening. I would love to learn from you. I care about how you feel and your perspective. I hadn't thought of it that way. Let me think about that for a bit before I respond.

We know the direction God wants us to go. It is the direction of community, of growing closer to people, of helping, of praise. Our task is to do whatever we can to point us back toward the God of love and forgiveness that we are trying to follow. We have to add our whole life, our loves, our passions, and our interests together with what God said God wants to be about.

When new life and love take hold at our center, when the Word of Christ dwells in us and our community, our life together is marked by enriching and wise conversation, grateful hearts, and by singing. Singing comes when we have had hard stories and bleak days and nights and through it all, we know in our minds, hearts and souls how to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. It is the tie that binds us. Will you join with me in singing that wonderful song?

"Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above. Before our God we come and pour our ardent prayers; our fears, our hopes, our aims are one; our comforts and our cares. We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear. When here our pathways part we suffer mutual pain; yet, one in Christ and one in heart, we hope to meet again." (Fawcett, alt; Tune: Dennis)

² https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/practicing-gentleness-in-the-age-of-outrage-copy-frank-j/?fbclid=IwAR1VI0rG35ULGv_6BzYaRM4PJcaldRG4xskYDs4nK3JURXfl_r7OlxYh5hQ

³ https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/practicing-gentleness-in-the-age-of-outrage-copy-frank-j/?fbclid=IwAR1VI0rG35ULGv_6BzYaRM4PJcaldRG4xskYDs4nK3JURXfl_r7OlxYh5hQ