

“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage ...” Scholars and church leaders over the ages have said: true wisdom is the knowledge of self and knowledge of God intertwined. By the time Colossians gets written, Christians had been walking together in living faith for a couple of decades. Basic understandings of Jesus and God’s way for us in him had been debated and creatively expressed – core theology and ethics still in early fluid stages of refinement. Many questions remained unanswered. Much confusion remained unclarified. Many implications and practical connections of God’s love in our life were still being discerned. God bridged a gap with us in Jesus. That’s basic theology. Now what does that look like in our everyday life? This translation of Colossians is my own, based on the NRSV and Message and personal work with text. Hear what the Spirit might say. {read Colossians 3:1-17, as follows}

So if you have been raised with Christ, if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue things which Christ embodies in God. Don’t shuffle along, eyes on the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, be alert to what is going on, set your mind on Christ and see things from his perspective. For your old way of life is dead. Your new life—real life—is with Christ, in God, even though it may be unknown to others. When Christ, your real life, gets revealed again, the real you, the glorious you will be seen, too.

Put to death, therefore, everything connected with the way of death: prostitution, impurity, lust, evil selfish desire, greed (which takes God’s place in your life). It’s because of these things that God is about to explode in anger. Not

long ago you were doing all that stuff and not knowing any better. But now you know, so get rid of all such things: anger, irritability, malice, slander, and abusive language. Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and thrown in the fire. And you've clothed yourself anew with the fashion of our Creator's grace, custom-made, tag hand-stitched. In that fashion, styling ourselves in old divisions no longer fits: Jewish or non-Jewish, religious or none, insider or outsider, barbarian or civilized, slave or free. From now on God's love in Christ is all that matters; look for it in all people.

So, chosen by God for this new life, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, and patient discipline. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Just as God in Christ has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Most important of all, clothe yourselves with love—your basic, all-purpose garment which coordinates everything and everyone in perfect harmony. Never be without it. Let the peace of Christ settle in your hearts and keep you in step with one another, as we share God's call to be the body of the risen Christ. And be thankful. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach, encourage, guide one another in all wisdom. Nurturing gratitude in your hearts, sing, sing your hearts and spirits out to God! And whatever you do—in thought, word or deed—do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God every step of the way.

While on the Camino pilgrimage in northern Spain, I'd talk with others as we walked together. The weather, soccer, current society, and when people found out I'm a minister, then basics of faith. Good questions. Good insights. Rich reflection. Companions often weren't religious, or had experiences of faith that weren't good, meaningful, relevant to real life. I get it in my own way; maybe you, too. We know it's true for others we meet. Friends, our call as the church—we beautiful,

delightful, imperfect people—our task together is increasingly to both a) clarify what’s really at the core of our faith, and b) convey that good news to all people; tell it abroad in all the earth (as we sang in our first hymn). Until gladness in all things blends in joy and peace that has no end—the Commonwealth God intends all people and creation to share. I’m pleased and privileged to keep walking that way with you on our pilgrimage of living faith.

On the Camino and in Kalamazoo, here’s a basic question I’ve heard to begin our walk together. Are people essentially good or evil? Who am I, who are you most truly, deep inside? Good or bad? Of course, we’re both.

I appreciate movies, shows, books that resist simplistic dualistic stories about eliminating “bad guys.” Like I’ve reread in Harry Potter recently. A bad guy betrayed Harry’s parents and got them killed. He was Harry’s father’s friend, now with ultimate-bad-dude Voldemort. Except, at a crucial point, he’s merciful to Harry and saves his life. In turn, Harry sees more and more how much he’s like Voldemort. He glimpses flaws in his superhero Dumbledore. And at the end of the last book, he discovers that his long-time arch nemesis Snape was really helping, protecting, collaborating with him in the most risky, life-threatening, self-sacrificial way ... all because Harry’s mother had been a kind companion when he was a ridiculed child; and all these years, he’s loved her.<sup>1</sup>

That’s real life. That’s people I’ve known, even amidst hurtful conflict, who convey a deep well of goodness in other ways. That’s colleagues who try our patience, even offend us, or likewise sometimes family members, who we also know can be kind, giving, gracious. That’s politicians or celebrities we might love or hate in two-dimensional perceptions. That’s people in a pew near you. That’s inside each of us.

“If we say we have no sin,” St. John wrote, “then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8) If we can’t admit we’re wrong sometimes in the Oval Office, on the campaign trail, in our work places and living rooms. If we can’t see faults and frailties when working together or looking in a mirror. Then we’re not being honest. “I don’t understand myself and how I’m acting,” St. Paul wrote to people like you and me in ancient Rome. “I don’t do what I want, and I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

St. Augustine, a church leader almost 400 years after Jesus, ran with that idea. As he processed his own lust, selfishness, greed, he established the idea of original sin. You know, we’re all born evil, passed on through sex, as Augustine imagined. Only Christ on the cross saves us from deadly divine punishment, if we accept that grace in faith. That theology can be construed from the Bible. Yet, when we hold babies in baptism (even ones that cry or scream like the devil!), when we get to know non-Christians who are such good people, I can’t quite go that far. For some of us this may be challenging; some liberating. For me, there’s more about who we are. Remember friends, the Bible is no science textbook or absolute literal historical fact. It’s holy literature that tries to convey who are we most truly in relation to God and to one another.

Genesis begins the Bible with a clear, core affirmation: we are created very good in the divine image of love, grace, and creativity. Psalm 139 echoes: “I praise you, God, for I’m amazingly and wonderfully woven in deepest secrets of divinity. Wonderful are all your works I know very well.” If there’s a final exam at the pearly gates, I bet this Psalm will be on it! At least, it’s one I’ll study to prepare! I love its honesty and intimacy, talking with the Holy One. Its authentic view of being human—wonderful and flawed, never quite getting divine ways completely. Created in grace, yet we can’t avoid sin. Any critique or act against evil in others, should start with thought about ourselves—how we get things wrong. Still, in the end, the

Psalm urges, who we are gets realized most truly in the light of God's love. When we reach the end of all we try to know about ourselves and our life in this world, we see light of the Eternal One who promises: I will be with you. "Search me, O God, know my heart. Lead me in your way of grace and peace everlasting."

That's what Jesus shows and empowers us to do. Constantly he comes to people that others deem bad—powerful people like tax collectors, politicians, Roman soldiers; powerless people like lepers, foreigners, others who society shoves to the fringes and religion condemns on the margins. Jesus comes to labeled people and sees loving goodness still in them. He heals in body, mind, spirit, perspective, as needed. He nurtures the grace inside each of them and all of us, so we live fully as God intends. Some paths of Christian thought over the ages see and walk in original goodness more than Augustine's original sin.

John Philip Newell offers a glimpse of Celtic Christianity. Yes, God's image and goodness in our hearts often gets covered, obscured, even seemingly lost. Yet, it's still there—eternal light shining in us, which no darkness can overcome. Newell lauds George MacLeod, a Scottish Presbyterian minister who started the Iona Community. MacLeod sought God's presence and spiritual purpose in all of life, rising from an imprint of the holy that remains. Envision heaven's glory interwoven with earth, even in dark times and places that threaten life.<sup>ii</sup> These aren't just nice thoughts we share in the comfort of these pews (that's a joke!), and the stained-glass beauty of this sanctuary. The Iona Community arose amid gritty realities of poverty and prejudice around Glasgow. George MacLeod was a member of the House of Lords, decorated in World War I, and chose to live this faith as a Presbyterian minister amid the harshest conditions of society.

Friends, this view of faith matters because inevitably what we believe shapes how we live. How we are inside is what people will see outside. Seeing human goodness

more than evil affects how we respond to a family member's hurtful words; how we process conflicts at work. It affects how we, as a society, shape policies about education and prison, about jobs and health care and community life. How we treat people with illness, in recovery, across the political aisle, or practicing another faith. We're not naïve. We don't justify or excuse poor choices as if anything goes. We name realities of harm and consequences, and face possibilities of abuse especially as it radiates into society. More on that next week. Yet, when we believe that we're all created in the blessed image of Divine Love and goodness, and that remains most true about who we are, we're more likely to forgive, to fight bias, to respect, and to pursue policies that renew creative possibility, more than merely punishing. When we give our hearts to that clear, core affirmation of divine goodness within us, then we'll rise above suspicion, fear, judgment which drains us, to live in hope, joy, promise. And we'll be turned from seeking power over others exercised out of fear to empowering divine goodness and creativity pulsing in each person.

The cross, the central symbol of our faith, reminds us that evil is real and sin takes life. Yet the cross is a promise. God is with us in it all to act with the power of resurrection—to make every day a day of resurrection. We see a cross and we know: Holy Love brings life greater than any power of death! It is loving goodness in us from birth, uncovered again, revived as the peace of Christ settles in our hearts and we live his way, we serve his purpose anew.

That's the encouragement early Christians—the Colossians—received. Since we've been raised with Christ, don't shuffle along in old ways. Gear up for new life, real life, our great ongoing pilgrimage to God's realm of peace. It's like stripping off old worn out, ill-fitting clothes of anger, malice, fear, division. Clothe ourselves anew in the fashion of sacred grace. When walking the Camino, one chooses carefully how to dress. Just a few shirts and pants, a bit of rain gear, good socks, and most days I wore these sandals. Can't remember when I got them, years and years ago. Beat up

now, bits broken off, stitching undone, sole wearing out. Like how I felt one day, needing a break. So I stopped in a church, sat on a ledge, rested my back against the cool stone. I looked down to see sunlight beaming through the dark. Surely in the shape of a window, or could it suggest the impression of a human silhouette? Divine Light shining through glass in the middle of my dirty, weary feet ... as at the very core of our battered, blemished, and beautiful being.

Years ago, I wore Birkenstock sandal-shoes every day. A mother told me her child thought I was Jesus! Far from it, but I wish! That's what I want to see in me, in you, in all people—love of Christ in each of us. That's what Colossians urges us to find and nurture. That's what we pray Christian Ed leaders help our kids look for in life. Sometimes old garments and gear of our beliefs get a bit worn, and we all look for the love of Christ in new translations, new connections, new ways that fit what we see in us and our world right now. {Change sandals} Whatever the current style ..... Clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, patient discipline. Bear with one another, forgive and be grateful. Dear friends, in my Holy Book, in my mind and heart, it's one of the best articulations of sacred grace, of heavenly fashion that defines who we truly are. Not condemned, depraved, to be scorned, rather holy, beloved of God, so able to bear good fruit as we pass on to others that power and purpose rising above all social categories, assumptions, false divisions.

That's what we come to this table to taste. If there's someone or some situation in which we find it hard to see anything good, as we come forward in a few moments, I invite us to try looking in another way. Savor the sacred grace of God's love in Christ, let it fill us. Let it transform how we see and are seen. Let it radiate through us. For how we clothe ourselves inside is what people see outside.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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- <sup>i</sup> See especially, J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2007)
- <sup>ii</sup> J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 14-15, 86-89.