



HOMECOMING/FAMILY AND FRIENDS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 23, 2012

Leah C. K. Lewis, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Assistant to the Pastor for Community Engagement, Olivet Institutional Baptist Church, Cleveland, OH.

Lection – Colossians 3:12-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 12) As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (v. 13) Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (v. 14) Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Homecoming, now also referred to as Family and Friends Day, is historically a day where people return to their home church which they have come to define as such for various reasons. This year on the Lectionary, we lift the notion that during Homecoming/Family and Friends Day congregations should be encouraged to be more compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and patient. Perhaps even more importantly as the world faces a period of economic hardship and upheaval, it

is essential that African American congregations, families, and communities become more united. This requires forgiveness for any past harm one may believe was caused by the leaders or members of a church community, family member, friend, or acquaintance. Ultimately, we need an infusion of actions that show the love of Christ. This love will bind our churches, families, and communities in perfect harmony.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Colossians 3:12-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Homecoming/Family and Friends Day is about “being bound” together, particularly, after reconnecting in some fashion. Our human experience is rife with all sorts of homecomings—the college student returning after graduation, a professional boomerang returning to the city of her youth to be closer to ailing or aging parents, or to merely enrich the lives of his parents and children by providing each greater access to the other.

Alternatively, in the midst of an economic downturn, homecomings become more necessary. Today, many in the United States can testify to having firsthand knowledge of being in the throes of a housing-related financial crisis. With unprecedented foreclosure rates experienced in the United States over the last few years, single individuals and entire families have had to turn to their loved ones for support and shelter. In the case of mortgage foreclosure, the homecoming is not a symbolic ritual of celebration, but a sorrowful, painful march to a place thought left behind.

Upon arrival, the newly re-expanded family may encounter some admixture of minor or grave challenges. Often, returning home conjures up all sort of thoughts, memories, and feelings—some pleasant, some not. Where the reminiscing leads to unpleasant sensations and sentiments the spirit that undergirds Homecoming/Family and Friends Day may become particularly useful. The instruction of Colossians 3:12-14 to embody compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness, bound together in love, offers a roadmap to living harmoniously within families, as well as within communities.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Interestingly, the Colossians were experiencing an economic decline in their city when Paul penned his epistle. Colosse had been a thriving center of commerce known for its glossy black wool. In time, Colosse became overshadowed by its neighbors in the Lycus Valley, Hierapolis and Laodicea. This particular letter of the Apostle Paul focuses upon Christ, the Head of the Church. Colossians offers a high Christology as it centers upon the cosmic Christ—“the head of every ruler and authority” (2:10). Christ, in short, is eminent and supreme. Additionally, the Christ of Colossians is the architect of reconciliation (2:13-15). Paul makes clear that for the Christian, “Christ is all and in all” (3:11). The book of Colossians is only four short chapters. The first two chapters provide doctrine while the final two chapters seek to elicit practice.

Ultimately, Colossians 3:12 -14 is about the essential dynamics of two forms of relationships: the Divine-to-human (or the vertical) and the human-to-human (or the horizontal). Consequently, a relational triad is at issue: God, self, and our fellow human beings. First, as the elect of God, the

text characterizes believers as “holy and beloved.” This is an assurance of what our true character must be. As such, we have a charge to “*clothe* [ourselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12).

As *holy and beloved*, church folk are generally held to an exceedingly high level of scrutiny and expectation. Outsiders and worshippers can become hurt and or disillusioned by un-godly behaviors exhibited by clergy and self-professed Christians. Yet it is imperative to remember that we too are human—frail, vulnerable, and prone to mistakes. Consequently, we are works-in-progress. As a song says, “Please be patient with me. God is not through with me yet.”

To this end, Paul’s instruction to “clothe” ourselves is telling. A quick study of the etymology of “clothe” and related words indicate that we are to *invest in* and *produce* virtue. This requires effort and perseverance. To clothe ourselves does not indicate that we are to assume, quickly and easily, a fake posture giving the mere appearance of being full of virtue. Getting dressed is an apt metaphor. We must pay for—invest in—clothing. Often when we shop, we must try on an outfit to determine if we wear it well. We examine ourselves in a mirror from various angles. Sometimes we must make adjustments to the sizes or pieces of our attire. Then, it is important to dress for the season to ensure good physical health. Getting dressed spiritually is a process through which we put off the old and put on the new appearance.

Ultimately, in Christ we are new creatures. “The new [human], which is the new creation, is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The strength of the new life does not come out of the old life. The policy we must pursue is not appeasement but crucifixion. We are to crucify the old nature and not gratify it.¹ We are to endure a process that beckons us toward transformation. Six integral character traits comprise the appropriate Christian outfit: *compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* held together by *love*.

While not obvious elements of the pericope, the ideals of mutuality and maturity lie beneath the surface of the text. Sweet-natured children innocently embody the six Christian ethics—adults, too often, not so much. Colossians, then, calls for us to grow beyond and out of a persona that is antithetical to a Christ-like character. One commentator, and I believe rightly, asserts that to give place to the disposition of Colossians is “... the only hope we can have for the solution to our social and racial problems. They have not been amenable so far to our previous efforts. Their one solution is to bring them to life’s common center, in Christ, where the distinctions cease to exist because of the new life.”²

Forgiveness is the linchpin of the Christian wardrobe because it fastens the human-to-human relationship. Where there is no forgiveness, there cannot be the actualization of love. Moreover, to fail to forgive our fellow human beings is to deny the grace of forgiveness already extended to them by our benevolent God.

When Christians submit to rootedness in Christ, commit to develop virtuousness, and practice forgiveness, reconciliation results. While the imagery of putting on a new garment is commonplace, the significant virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and even love are seldom achieved effortlessly. However, given the biblical, historic, and personal importance of our families and friends, we can do no less than strive with all of our might to

reconcile our families, friends, churches, and communities in love. Too much is at stake for us to do otherwise.

Challenge

Our challenge is to examine ourselves and to take responsibility for the mistakes we have made, innocent or otherwise, and for the injuries we have caused. We must first confess these errors to God and then seek the forgiveness of those we have harmed. In the reconciliation, we must forgive—ourselves and others—then reunited we must walk in love. To this end, be mindful that,

The same love of God manifest in Christ (1:13; 3:12), which is a kind of cosmic force for cohesion, is now echoed in the chief obligation of Christians. The church will be held together by the extension of Christ's love. The active practice of forgiveness and love toward other Christians is essential for church unity and the attaining of Christian maturity (1:28).³

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage and its liturgical moment include:

Sounds of the pericope:

The sounds of exhaling and relief after:

- receiving the election of God (v.12);
- being reconciled to friend(s) and family after a quarrel or period of estrangement;
- struggling to attain compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love; and
- acceptance in the forgiveness that comes pursuant to v. 14—“forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

Lastly, we have the sounds of sighs and whimpers that come with the heaviness or discontent in “bear[ing] with one another” (v. 13).

- [Longsuffering] means the endurance of patience through successive stages of trial and suffering. Jan Struther wrote about it under the title “Our Anvil Moments” in referring to the balance qualities of **patience in suffering** and **strength in action**. He referred to a couplet by John Florio written in 1591, “when you are an anvil, hold you still; when you are hammer, strike your fill.” Struther says this:

In order to live our lives we need the two balanced but related qualities of patience in suffering and strength in action. We are both object and subject... There are some situations in which we are unable to take action. Losses, bereavements, disappointments... these may strike at any hour with terrible force. All we can do is brace ourselves against the shock. Those are our anvil moments. But there are other situations in which we have the power to act, and at such times we need all of our firmness and singleness of purpose. We must strike quickly,

strike hard, and above all strike in the right place. With these qualities—patience and strength—we can endure all things, and achieve many.⁴

- “Forbearing”–“Forgiving.” This is what we would call an ensemble since it is two garments in one continuing with my metaphor from above. They are separately described as tolerance and generosity. In forbearing we **hold everything back** while in forgiving **we hold nothing against**. Forbearance refuses to demand what is due while forgiveness gives more than is due. These produce in character a beautiful balance of attitude. They enable us to be well proportioned.

There is a place for tolerance and also for intolerance. There is a genuine intolerance which belongs to Christians; it is better known by the phrase righteous indignation. Jesus had it. He was intolerant of sin, shams, and hypocrisy. When are we entitled to be intolerant? It has been well put this way: “If Jesus Christ has done something upon which the salvation of the world depends and if that has been revealed in the gospel, then it is the Christian’s duty to be intolerant of everything that seeks to deny, discount or discredit that work of Christ and the testimony of the gospel that declares it.”⁵

The sounds of reunion:

- laughter and tears of joy, or conversely groaning where there is sorrow in reuniting; and
- shouts of delight, when a person attends homecoming services and walks the aisle when the pastor opens the doors of the church for new member to unite with the church.

Sights: Garments and the accessories of a belt, a sash, or anything material that holds the entire ensemble together physically and aesthetically.

- (v. 14) Above all, **clothe** yourselves with love, which **binds** everything together in perfect harmony
- (v. 12) As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, **clothe** yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.
- “We need spiritual garments for a spiritual walk.”⁶
- “The final garment to be put on is love itself, which will hold the rest in place: and over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”⁷
- “...the garment of Love...is the final garment from the wardrobe of grace. It is described not only as the last but also as the perfecting, and finishing quality of character. It is the garment [that] is to be ‘above all.... This garment integrates all the rest.’”⁸

For clergy, the critical accessory is the stole that symbolizes the “yoke of God.” Symbolically, we are bound to God (and God to us) by the yoke. Further, when worn it stands out for the congregation or believer as an indication that we are somehow the elect of God—God’s chosen representatives set apart to lead, guide, preach, teach, chaplain, and counsel. Where the stole is a binding force, the clergy robe or vestment ought to represent love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. The clergy, then, has a particular obligation to live out the edict of Colossians 3:12-14.

Smells: Those stomach and nasal-stimulating aromas that waft through a sanctuary associated with the fellowship reception or Sunday dinner scheduled for after service.

III. Other Materials for Use During Homecoming/Family and Friends Day

The following songs and quotes are appropriate for today's Scripture and Homecoming/Family and Friends Day:

Songs

- **“Time to Come Home.”** Sung by Beyonce, Melba Moore, and Angie Stone
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNYPm71OGqI>
- **“Others.”** By Israel Houghton
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPvlvFQcq80>
- **“I Need You to Survive.”** By Hezekiah Walker
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMcJL_UDAvw
- **“Changed.”** By Tremaine Hawkins
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Kymk9f2TNQ>
- **“I Surrender All.”** Hymn. Sung by Cece Winans with Introduction by Whitney Houston
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM9FGN5BMDU&feature=related>
- **“In Christ There Is No East or West.”** By John Oxenham. The African American Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #s 398 and 399
- **“Here I Go Again.”** Sung by Casting Crowns
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXbA_A3eTGw
- **“Count on Me.”** Sung by Whitney Houston and Cece Winans
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXttyNf8zv0>
- **“A Time for Love.”** By Stevie Wonder featuring India Arie and Paul McCartney
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyDaeGI6eb8>
- **“He Looked Beyond My Fault and Saw My Need.”** Sung by The Jackson Southernaires
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3k0yz4vHnYo&feature=related>
- **“Lord, I Want to Be a Christian.”** Sung by Darin Atwater with Kristle Ransom
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fUPFGmDtD0&feature=related>

Quotes

- Meekness is not a synonym for weakness. It means mildness and indicates a tempered character where on the one hand there is freedom from an over-bearing attitude, rudeness and harshness and on the other hand freedom from a weak, fawning and servile submission so often thought of as meekness.⁹
- Victor Hugo wrote ... “Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones, and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.”¹⁰
- Love thus becomes the climax of character. It is the integrating quality and the perfecting virtue. It is not only the last but also the first. It is not an addition but a condition. It is the capstone that binds the structure.
When we have put on these garments from the new wardrobe of grace, we are all dressed up with some place to go. We are a people with a life to live, a place to fill and a mission to fulfill. Grace provides the garments of character with which we are to go to our life and service. Not until we put on love which binds all else together in perfect harmony are we dressed for the occasion.¹¹
- And if ‘kindness’ is a Christlike attitude toward others, humility is the Christlike attitude toward oneself, supremely exemplified in that readiness to forgo his own rights which led the Son of God to the incarnation and cross (Phil. 2:5-11).¹²
- The last two qualities ... are the positive and negative outworkings of kindness and humility: gentleness is the effect of meek humility on one’s approach to other people, whereas patience is the effect of that humble kindness on one’s reaction to other people. The first forswears rudeness or arrogance; the second, resentment and anger.¹³
- These virtues are at once given practical application: bear with the other—i.e. restrain your natural reaction towards odd or difficult people, let them be themselves—and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another....¹⁴
- First, it is utterly inappropriate for one who knows the joy and release of being forgiven to refuse to share that blessing with another. Second, it is highly presumptuous to refuse to forgive one whom Christ himself has already forgiven.¹⁵
- The other virtues, pursued without love, become distorted and unbalanced.¹⁶

Notes

1. Laurin, Roy L. “The Christian and His Character.” Colossians: Where Life Is Established. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1988. p. 134.
2. Ibid., pp. 134–135.
3. Hay, David M. “Commentary.” Colossians. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000. pp. 132–133.

4. "The Christian and His Character." pp. 140–141.
5. Ibid., pp. 142–143.
6. Ibid., p. 135.
7. Wright, N T. "Colossians: Commentary." Colossians and Philemon. Downers Groves, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1986. p. 147.
8. "The Christian and His Character." p. 143.
9. Ibid., p. 140.
10. Ibid., pp. 141–142.
11. Ibid., p. 144.
12. "Colossians: Commentary." p. 146.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 147.
16. Ibid.