

A GATHERING OF CLOSERS

Colossians 3:10-12

There is a car commercial I've seen several times that speaks to something I know I have felt, and I'm not alone. The commercial features a kind of geeky guy who is walking down the street. Repeatedly he has what is for him obviously an unusual experience of noticing that pretty girls are looking at him. He is not a head turning attractive guy, at least he didn't think so, but this day everywhere he goes the girls are looking at him. By the end of the commercial he is confidently strutting down the street knowing the girls think he's hot. What he doesn't realize, of course, is that the girls aren't looking at him at all. In every instance the advertised car happened to be driving by behind him and the girls are staring at the car. It's not him they find hot, it's the car. The poor guy is left to revel in his illusion. Laurie gets into commercials and always wants to know what happened next. In that case I envision the geek acting on his illusion and hitting on one of the pretty girls. Crash and burn, Mav.

Who wouldn't like to be the person everyone is drawn to? Who doesn't want to be the star, the special person that everyone notices? What we've learned is that we're not that person. Life has taught us that without doubt we're ordinary, the person who can get overlooked in a crowd of three. If you've ever felt like that, but you are a believer in Jesus I have some very good news for you today that we'll find in Colossians 3:10-12. The news is that you are far from ordinary. You are special in a powerful way.

WE HAVE A NEW WAY

In verse 9-10 Paul wrote, "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." This has been the theme since 2:12 where Paul described followers of Jesus as "having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." We have seen that something ended when we put our faith in Jesus. The life we had, the people we were before Jesus ended. Something new started, a whole new life being lived by a new person with a new heart.

The same message shows up in 2 Corinthians 5:17. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." This may be more apparent in people who put their faith in Jesus a little later in life, but for all of us there was a reason we decided to believe in Jesus and let him rule as Lord of our lives. We do that because something about our old life was not working for us. We saw a need that only Jesus could meet.

When we put our faith in Jesus we gave up on what we had believed and how we lived prior to that point. The old us, the old life came to an end. We had a fresh start with a new life that is qualitatively different than the old. This is a priceless gift. How often in life do you have that happen? God himself has given us a brand new life with a new way of living.

Listen to how the New Testament describes that old life. In Romans 6:13 Paul wrote, “Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.” Wait, from death to life? It wasn’t that bad, was it? Ephesians 2:1 says of us, “you were dead in your transgressions and sin.” Oh, I wasn’t that awful. This is not saying you were awful. This is death as opposed to life as God intended it. Ephesians 5:22-23 describe some aspects of that life. It is a life filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. It is a life that is full, not empty. It is a life that has meaning and direction in everything it does. The death referred to is an existence where those things are lacking.

In Ephesians 2:12 Paul described it as being “without hope and without God in the world.” Having no hope is death to humans. Without hope we despair and quit. Being without God is worse. We were created to live in relationship with God, for him to be a hopeful and life-giving reality in our lives. When we are without him, no matter what else may happen in our lives, we will not experience fullness of life. I have told you before that as a result of a head injury I suffered many years ago I have a ringing in my left ear that never goes away. It’s been there so long I am not even aware of it. However, a number of years ago I caught an upper respiratory infection that impacted my right ear and caused a ringing in it, only it was at a different frequency than the one in my left. It was really irritating. I could not tune it out. I could function, but I was always aware of that ringing and it made life unpleasant. There was not a single moment when I was not aware of the fact that something was wrong with me. It made life tiring. When we are not in connection with God it will be like that ringing. We can function, but we will always be aware that something is wrong. It is an exhausting way to live.

In Christ we’ve been given a new life, a new start that is full of life not death. We no longer have that ringing in our ears, because we now are in close connection to God who is our Father. We have meaning in everything we do, and we have access to that life of love, joy, peace and all the rest of those things we long for. We have hope that gives us strength to keep going. We gave up the old for the new, and learning to live out the new is a process. As verse 10 says we are continually being renewed, transformed into people experiencing the fullness of our new life. The point here is, why would we ever think of going back to our old life? To return to it is to go back to death! We’ve been give this great gift of being done with the old and its death, and having the new.

Verse 11 informs us of an aspect of this new life that is powerful. “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” All of those words refer to ways people in the first century differentiated themselves from others. The Jews saw themselves as “the circumcised,” the people who were chosen by God and had a covenant with him. Those who were not Jewish, the Gentiles, were the “uncircumcised,” the unwashed, unclean masses who were not welcome to participate in the covenant relationship with God. The Gentiles, meanwhile, often were prejudiced against Jews. But they went farther than that. If you were not a Greek speaker you were a barbarian. They applied that term to anyone who did not speak Greek as their native tongue because to Greeks their language sounded like nonsense syllables like “bar, bar, bar.” I guess you could say it was all not Greek to them. Scythians were a nomadic tribe found around the northern shores of the Black Sea. They had a reputation for being particularly savage. Labeling someone a Scythian was saying they were just that – a savage. Of course there was the line between slave and free, with the free looking down on the slave.

These words remind us of the reality of the human race. We are continually labeling others, looking for ways to differentiate ourselves from those people who are different. The whole point of that is to make us feel better than them. You find this everywhere in the world. Back in the dark ages in the middle of the 20th century there was a folk music group called The Kingston Trio. Among their popular songs was one called *The Merry Minuet*. In part its lyrics were, “the whole world is festering with unhappy souls. The French hate the Germans, the Germans hate the Poles. Italians hate Yugoslavs South Africans hate the Dutch, and I don’t like anybody very much.” That’s an unfortunate and true description of the human race. We divide into “us” and “them,” and do all we can to look down on them.

It would be nice to think that we have gotten past racism in our country, but last year’s events in Missouri were a reminder that’s not even close to true. It’s everywhere in the world. Hutus can’t get along with Tutsis, Sunnis can’t get along with Shiites, the 99% in America are angry at the 1%, Democrats can’t get along with Republicans and vice versa, Koreans and Japanese despise each other, as do Chinese and Japanese. People divide over whether the dress is blue and black or white and gold. Well, maybe not, but we do have a nearly irresistible tendency to divide the world into them and us.

Years ago I was amazed by a story I read in the newspaper. It was about something that happened in Concord, New Hampshire, a town of 42,000 people. Six families moved into homes on Walnut Street in a new development. It was a nice, happy neighborhood. Everything was great until the city upgraded its 911 service and found that there was another Walnut Street already in existence in the city. They determined that having 2 streets with the same name would cause problems for emergency personnel, so the new

Walnut Street needed to be renamed. They asked the 6 families to come up with a new name. They all got together for a neighborhood party to choose a name. They came up with several suggestions like Woodpecker Street, Memory Lane, Lois Lane, and so on. Several of the families owned black dogs so one suggestion was Black Dog Lane. But they couldn't agree. The article said, "And that is how the war began. Within weeks good friends became estranged, next door neighbors stopped talking, folks plotted and lobbied." One neighbor described it as a disaster. That's the human race for you.

The astounding thing about this new life, this new way of living, is that in it all such distinctions are obliterated. There is no Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, slave, free, American, Chinese, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, there are only children of God. What binds us together is Christ in us. He is in all of us who have this new life, and there is no way that Christ in me will put down, look down on or be prejudiced against Christ in anyone else. In order for that to be a reality in this new life we will have to view each other in a radically new way.

In 2 Corinthians 5:16 Paul wrote, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." Notice that statement begins with "so," meaning it derives from something Paul just said. In verse 15 speaking of Jesus Paul wrote, "and he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again." Because we no longer live for ourselves we don't regard people from a worldly point of view.

That tells us that the worldly way of viewing people has something to do with living for ourselves. When we stop living that way we view people differently. Viewing people the worldly way is all about serving selfish interest. It is to value people for what I perceive they can do for me. So some people I view as lesser beings so that I can feel I am better than them. I value people in this world by how rich, powerful, attractive or famous they are because somehow if I can connect with them that can benefit me. So there is this constant game of putting down, of comparing, of climbing to get close to people who I perceive as possibly being of benefit to me. None of that has any part in the new life in Christ. Here we are all God's children, loved and valued just for who we are. This becomes the basis of one of the most powerful aspects of God's work, the unity that should be characteristic of his people. This has some profound implications for how we treat each other. Paul will tell us about that but first there are some crucial realities about us in Christ we need to grasp.

WE HAVE BEEN CHOSEN

Verse 12 begins with the words "therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved." Before we attempt to obey the commands Paul was about to give we need to

have a firm grip on the fact that we must do so as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” It is also important to remember that since there is no difference in the body of Christ we should view all those in the body with us as also “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.”

That would have been a remarkable thing for most of the Christians in Colossae to hear. They were nobodies, living in a dying town. They counted for nothing in the world. They’d never been chosen for anything good. They felt unimportant and insignificant. They weren’t special and they knew it. But Paul says God chose them, just like he has chosen us. They were special to God, regardless of what the world might think of them.

1 Peter 2:9 says something similar. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Again in Ephesians 1:4 we read that God “chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

All of us long to be picked, to be special. You can go all the way back to those days in elementary school when your group was going to play a baseball or football game. Two captains were identified and then came the very first form of a player draft. The captains would alternate picking players for their team. Who did not long to be a first round draft pick? To be chosen, wanted, viewed as special? And we all know how awful it would feel to be Mr. Irrelevant, which is the moniker hung on the 256th pick, the last player chosen in the annual NFL draft. At least that guy is chosen by an NFL team, which means he was a good college football player. How awful to be Mr. Irrelevant in the third grade lunch time football draft at Horace Mann Elementary School. Not that I know how that feels from personal experience, of course. In high school it was being selected for the homecoming court, maybe being homecoming queen. All of us long to be chosen, picked out as special.

Christian writer, speaker and pastor, Tim Challies recently wrote, “I am hardwired for something—for validation. Just as a dog will lie down or roll over or beg or bark on command to get a sausage...there is not much I won’t do to receive validation, to have others affirm my self worth according to my criteria. I want to feel special about myself. I want to feel big and important. He’s exactly right. He sees this in himself in that he revels in invitations to speak to large audiences at big conferences even though he’s a homebody who is intimidated by large crowds.

The term “holy” is a beautiful term. Today it is rarely used with its true sense, which is highly appealing. It is almost derogatory to call someone holy today. Even when we use it in a positive sense we think of it as meaning “really good,” having nothing to do with

evil. It can have that meaning, but it frequently means to be different. Something that is holy in this biblical sense is set apart for a special, noble purpose. It is on the other end of the spectrum from ordinary. For instance, in the temple in Jerusalem there was the Holy Place that only priests could enter, and in it was the Holy of Holies, sometimes called the Most Holy Place, a place only the high priest could enter once a year. It wasn't called holy because it was better or more pure than other places, but because it was set apart for a noble purpose. It was the place of atonement, the central truth of the covenant, that God would make provision for his people to be forgiven. People didn't take naps or have lunch there. It was special, serving a high calling. This is what it means to be holy.

I want to throw a couple of pictures at you to cement this idea in your heart and mind. At our house we have some dishes that are Laurie's favorites. They are made by Lenox and they're called British Colonial. They have an island theme. They're pretty expensive. We don't use them for normal meals. If you come to our house and you are served a meal using those dishes you can know it is a special occasion. I suspect those dishes probably get used about 10 times a year. They are used only for special meals. They are holy. They are set apart for a special use and are too valuable to be risked for every day, run of the mill events.

For the sports minded here's another picture. When I was young major league teams had two types of pitchers. There were starting pitchers and there were relief pitchers. The starters were always the best pitchers on your team. They pitched as long as they could, and when it was time for a change a relief pitcher would be brought in, pretty much on the whim of the manager. In the 1980's and 1990's a new pattern began to emerge. Dennis Eckersley set the model with the Oakland A's. He would only come into games in the 9th inning with his team ahead by a narrow margin. Thus was established the role now known as a closer. He is usually the best relief pitcher on the team. His job is to get those last 3 outs of a win. A closer is holy. He has a noble calling. He is never brought into a game in the 4th inning to clean up a mess the starter has gotten into. He is never brought into a game that's a blowout. He is never brought in with the team losing. He is special, to be used for that one purpose.

Do you begin to get a picture of your position as a follower of Jesus? You are chosen, holy, called to a noble purpose. You are the special dishes. You are the closer. You are special and not to be wasted in diversionary or wasteful pursuits that would distract from your real calling. You are on this earth for a reason. God has you here on purpose, as 1 Peter 2:9 says, "to declare the praises of him who called you." You are called to bring praise to God not just through your words but through your godly life as he shine the light of God's goodness, grace and love everywhere you go. That's what it means to be holy.

Verse 12 says an amazing thing. In Christ we are chosen, we are the first round draft pick, we are special, called to the most noble of purposes, and we are beloved. This is who we are in Christ. We are loved more than we can comprehend. We are loved the way we've always longed to be loved, to the degree that nothing will ever block or change that love. The problem with us is we easily lose sight of the fact that we have been chosen and are special and are loved. When we do two things happen.

First we lose that sense of our holiness. We lose track of the fact that we are special. We start feeling ordinary and feel like we are somehow on the outside looking in. The thing that suffers most when we begin pursuing something other than God's calling of us is we lose dignity, we lose that since that we are holy and special. We go from being the fine china to being a paper plate that will just get thrown away. We go from being the premier closer to a minor league middle reliever who only comes into a game when the starter got shelled in the first inning and the game is hopelessly lost. Our life loses meaning and value.

The second thing that happens is since all of us have somewhere the idea inside that we were born to be special and loved we start trying to get it back. We try to earn God's love, which is impossible. We start trying to carve out for ourselves some role in life that we think will make us feel special. We try to earn being chosen. Those efforts will inevitably be futile and leave us frustrated, hopeless and cynical.

Lacking meaning we will also try to carve out some sense of meaning for our lives, only whatever we pick will be something of far less significance than we were created for. It will end up being an illusion. People pick some weird ways to do this. Did you know that there is an organization called Major League Eating? They have those competitive eating contests. Ranked number 1 right now is a guy named Joey Chestnut. The Major League Eating website says he is, "truly an American hero and a national treasure." Well he sure is. He has eaten more than 4 entire 3-pound apple pies in 8 minutes. He ate 47 grilled cheese sandwiches in 10 minutes once. He ate an entire 9.35 pound turkey in 10 minutes. This makes him a hero? A national treasure? Who grows up thinking being a champion glutton is a good thing? People are desperate to find something that marks them out as significant. Did you know there is a Rock Paper Scissors national championship? Did you know there is a Lawn Mower racing championship? These things can never fill that desire to be chosen and special. That comes from God choosing us and setting us apart.

Our efforts to somehow mark ourselves as special, as having meaning, as deserving of being chosen, inevitably produce competition with others. They become a threat to us.

This is what happens in the church if we don't grasp that we are all chosen and special and beloved.

WE ARE TO LIVE ACCORDINGLY

If I am chosen, special and loved, and all those in the body of Christ are also chosen by God, special to him and loved by him, how should I relate to them? All the problems that occur in the church between people start with forgetting those realities.

The temptation when a pastor comes to a section of scripture like verse 12 is to expound on each item in the list. You spend time explaining in exhaustive detail what each term means because it is your job to expound on the meaning and significance of the Scriptures. This approach suffers from two problems. First it assumes that people don't know what these terms mean. Excuse me, but do you really need me to explain what compassion is? Do you not know what it means to be kind or patient? My suspicion is every one of you has a pretty clear grasp on what each of these words mean and what they look like in practice.

That first problem isn't disastrous. It just means I run the risk of trying too hard to be profound while boring you because you already get it. The second problem is quite a bit more dangerous. When I hear a sermon in which the pastor exhaustively goes through a list like this I end up with a law. Now it is possible that this is just my particular problem, but I have a sneaking suspicion that others share in it. I turn this into a check list. So I have to work to be compassionate. How am I doing? Pretty good. Okay, check off compassionate. What's next? I need to be kind. How's that going? Uh, maybe needs some work. So I focus on being kind until I can check it off the list. Great, got that covered, so what's next? Humility. Humility? Uh oh, now maybe I have to go back to uncheck the first two in order to be humble. In the end this approach is bound to produce is a sense of failure and weariness. I'll end up saying, "I'm never going to get this. I might as well just give up." I don't think that's what Paul was shooting for.

Paul is using various virtues to describe the general way that we should relate to one another. These qualities are linked. If you're compassionate you will be kind, patient and gentle with people. If you're not humble you're not going to have much compassion for people. You'll look down on them and be impatient with their shortcomings. If you're kind with people you will be gentle and patient with them. So what Paul is doing here is saying here's how a chosen, special, loved person will relate to people who are so loved by God, special to him. You see the same idea in Ephesians 4:2 and 32 where Paul says, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" then goes on in verse 32 to say, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

As I think about this list the two things that seem most crucial are humility and compassion. Without the humility we won't have compassion. But if we are humble we will look with compassion on other flawed people. And if we have compassion we will be kind, gentle and patient with them, no matter what their shortcomings.

Recently while we were eating dinner Laurie knocked over her glass causing it to flood the table and cascade down onto her lap and the floor. It was strange observing that because it almost looked like she did it intentionally. It was a mess. My attitude about the event was not annoyance or frustration with her, it was sympathy. It was sympathy because I recall the time I did the same thing with a glass of grape juice, which stains like crazy. It was sympathy because it's every week's business for me to spill ketchup or syrup or jam or something on my shirt while trying to eat. My failures have humbled me. They cause me to feel I have no room to be annoyed by anyone else's failures.

When we see our own guilt before God, when we see how badly we fail him, we are going to be very patient and sympathetic with others. We will be humble, we will be compassionate, and we will be gentle. When we are impatient or critical of them we are setting ourselves up as better, as their judges, a clear evidence of our failure to see our own desperate need before God.

One year while I was in grad school to support myself I took a job as a teacher part time. I taught geometry and algebra II at a Lutheran school. I also had one middle school religion class. The two math classes went well, the religion class not so much. The problem was it had middle schoolers in it. Why was that a problem? Because I was a fish to the sharks. Those junior highers ate me alive. At the end of the first semester I cried uncle. I quit teaching that class. Now my brother has a job teaching in a private school. He has some middle school religion classes. What do you think my attitude toward him is? It is not, "Oh, come on, dude, that's easy. Buck up and get control of those insane excuses for human beings." Far from it. My attitude is "I feel your pain."

Think back to what happened in Concord, New Hampshire. Imagine that those 6 families on Walnut Street were all living in the newness of life in Christ. Imagine that they were all resting in the reality that they were chosen, special, loved by God. Imagine that they saw each other as special in God's eyes, chosen in beloved, and as a result they were humble with each other and had compassion on each other. Would the name of the street be so important that they would get angry with each other and sever relationships? No, in their humility and compassion they would be gentle with each other, they would be patient and kind, and they would most definitely not sacrifice God's chosen, special, beloved people for their own preference for the name of a street.

CONCLUSION

All around us are people God has called, people he loves dearly. They are constantly under attack from the enemy, they are dealing with the daily struggle in a fallen world to just stay faithful. They are aware of their own shortcomings and sometimes they struggle with them. In many cases they are constantly battered and in great need of encouragement. They don't need more rejection, more criticism, more impatience. They need some compassion. They need encouragement and help. They need patience, kindness, and they need to be treated gently.

Last year Admiral William McRaven, a 35 year Navy Seal and at the time Commander of US Special Operations Command, delivered the commencement address at the University of Texas. It was a terrific speech in which he shared lessons from his Seal training. He described one torturous night that was part of Hell Week, the peak of the torture that is Seal training. By this time his class of 150 candidates that began the training was down to 35, all the rest had washed out. On Wednesday night the instructors ordered the students into their 7 man rafts. They launched them out through the surf and were told to paddle south from their base at Coronado. They paddled down to the Tijuana slough. There they beached their rafts and were ordered into the mud flats. This was in the dead of winter. They had to wade out into the mud until they were neck deep with only their heads out of the mud. They were soaked, the mud was wet and bitterly cold, and they had to just stand there for the next 15 hours through the entire night. They were shivering, their teeth were chattering so loud and the men were moaning so loud from the cold that you couldn't hear anything over the noise. The instructors kept yelling at them if just 5 of them would quit then they could all get out of the mud and go home. He said he could look around and see that guys were right on the verge of quitting. The misery seemed unbearable and the lure of just making it stop seemed irresistible. He remembered thinking at one point after interminable hours of enduring the misery there were still 8 more hours of darkness and bone chilling cold ahead and it seemed too much to endure. At that point suddenly one voice popped up. One man started singing. He was singing badly off key, could hardly carry a tune, but he was singing loudly and enthusiastically. Pretty soon another man joined him, and then another, and another, until all of them were singing. The instructors yelled at them to stop singing or they would make them stay longer in the mud, but they just kept on singing. He said all of them were thinking if one man could rise above the misery, then they could too. Suddenly the mud didn't seem as cold and the dawn didn't seem as far away. He made it through that night and became a seal. We're all here together, neck deep in the mud and misery of this world, and we all need someone to start singing. We need someone to rise above the misery and be that example of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, and that one person will give hope to all the others so they can follow the example.