

First Sunday after Christmas

Sermon Text: Colossians 3:12-17

Theme: “*Christian Virtues*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

“But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”

For better or for worse, 2009 rapidly draws to a close in the next few days and the arrival of a new year often leads to contemplation and resolutions. Whether you are one who makes new year resolutions and tries hard to keep them, I’ll leave that to you; but St. Paul gives us good words as we look to the upcoming year, and whatever the Lord has in mind for the Cairns Lutheran Parish – for His people here and everywhere as we await His return in glory.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Serve with love

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, we are to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. That’s how our second reading begins. Put on these virtues, it says; don’t just bring them out from time to time for special occasions, but clothe yourselves in them. Wear them constantly and treat other people accordingly. Clothe yourself in tender mercies and kindness: wear these daily. Where people are in need, do what you can to assist them but don’t do so out of pride or in such a way that shows everyone else just how good you are – do it because your brother or sister is in need of help, and you might just be the person whom God has put there to help them.

This should go the same for how we act as a congregation also: act with tender mercy toward the body of Christ in this place. Where there is the need for service and help, set aside the time to be merciful to the congregation here. Let’s clothe ourselves in humility, meekness and patience. The world works by power, by striving to gain for yourself by being better than those around you. That is not how Christians live. Do not clothe yourself in pride which draws attention to your own achievements, however big or small they are; rather, put on humility which seeks to serve others for the sake of Jesus.

Do not seek to use what authority God gives you in order to make people serve you. This doesn’t change whether you are a parent, teacher, pastor, supervisor, head of the household, or any other leadership position you can think of. Instead clothe yourself in meekness that uses this authority to serve. Be patient, clothe yourself in longsuffering. There will be plenty of people and situations which annoy you and inconvenience you, perhaps even hurt you, but be patient, for the Lord is patient with you.

As you are clothed in these virtues, the Paul then invites you to bear with one another and forgive one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you must also do. Unfortunately the truth is that even those saved by grace for Jesus’ sake, are still plagued by sin in this world. Therefore, it is necessary that each of us bear with the faults of each other and forgive each other. This is obvious, and yet it can be terribly difficult. There will be brothers and sisters in Christ, people sitting in these same pews as you, whom you do not like very much – you may even find them very uncomfortable to be around. When you encounter such people, it is easy to spot whatever weaknesses they have and target them, either by pushing them out or just making fun of them in comments to your friends. This is not how God wants us to behave. You and I each have our own weaknesses and limitations. We each have sins which need to be forgiven, none of us are perfect so we should bear with one another. Where there is sin, clothe yourself in repentance if you are the sinner and forgiveness if you are the victim.

And while you may still not get along with everybody, remember two things. First, each one here is one for whom Christ died, and that means the Lord places immense value upon them. Second, the Lord does not require to like people you don’t get along with...but He does require you to love them.

This brings us to the third verse of the text, the summary of the first half: “But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.” Clothe yourselves in love: wear it constantly. Not the gooey emotional stuff of romantic movies, that’s not the love which Paul talks about. Instead, this love is the total of all the virtues listed in the previous verses, and then more. It is all the good thoughts, words and deeds put together. It is the hard work of service toward other people. It is the bond of perfection that binds everything together in perfect harmony. As brothers and sisters in Christ, you are daily and continually to clothe

yourselves in fulfilling the Law. You are daily to love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind; and you are daily to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now hearing this, you will know that we can never be clothed as we should be because we all sin and perfect obedience is beyond our abilities. This is true, but it is not an excuse to be unloving or to give up trying to obey for to do so led us into be entrapped by sin. But the more we put on *love*, even imperfectly, the better we will function as loving people and as a loving congregation.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts

But even as important as love may be, it is not the foundation of who we are as Christians for if it were, the strength of our church would be how we are able to love others and ourselves. That is why we turn from love and turn to peace.

“Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which you were called in one body.” When the angels sang praises to shepherds at Christmas, they sang “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all people.” When Jesus first appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, his first words to them were, “Peace be with you.”

Now sin causes strife with other people but even worse it makes us enemies with God. If we are to be at peace with God, then our sins must be taken away. That is what Jesus has come to do, to bring peace by taking away sin. The peace of God is nothing else than the forgiveness that Jesus brings.

So after telling you to clothe yourselves in love, St Paul quickly tells you to let the peace of God rule in your hearts. Be forgiven. Jesus is merciful to you and forgives you, not because of what you have done, but because of what he has done for you. Jesus rewards you, not because of your love, but according to his love. Even though we cannot clothe ourselves as we ought to, Jesus has clothed you with himself in holy baptism. Jesus has covered you over with his righteousness, with his meekness, with his humility. And for all the times we are not patient, the Lord as suffered with our sins and still patiently grants us his grace today.

His grace give you peace with God, and if you are at peace with God, you are his beloved child. And if you are his beloved child, then every good gift of God belongs to you.

This is the substance of our worship for all worship should bring you to the peace of God. “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom”. Therefore we speak the Word of Christ for by it the Word made flesh dwells in us with all of his grace and favour. Now there are other words in the world and many of them contain great wisdom and help and good advice but it is only God’s Word that gives you his peace. Likewise, as we sing God’s Word through our hymns and songs, we share his word with one another and with the world that needs to hear a joyful noise. There are many other songs that might make us feel good, but the music of worship is that which proclaims God’s peace with us in Christ.

So what we do, we do it all in the name of Jesus, we do it as those who he has put his name on as his holy people. In other words, we love others because he first loved us. If we are forgiven, love will follow.

Christmas has drawn to a close and the new year presses upon us. May this new year be one of Christian love which is lived out in faith wherever God places us.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.