

The Reading of Titus 2:11-14

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

The Reading of Colossians 3:11-17

¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear 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. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This year at Advent, I've been thinking a lot about Jesus' family, about the people who had an impact on him becoming the person he was chosen and destined to become. In considering his lineage this year, we have dug through his ancestry by looking at the opening of Matthew's gospel. We listened to his Uncle Zech's prophesy that said God would raise up a mighty Savior for us, one that would, by the tender mercies of God, give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and guide our feet into the ways of peace. We were introduced to his cousin's passion and his mother's deep prayerfulness. We heard the difficult stories of Joseph's care for this boy as he took his family across borders into Egypt, fleeing the wrath of King Herod. Jesus' family was truly important, chosen as much as Jesus himself in preparing for times ahead. They were wise to strike a balance of keeping him safe and teaching him courage for the unbelievably difficult times to come.

It is up to our family of faith to do the same – to protect us and bring light in times of darkness, AND to embolden us to live courageously in times of great difficulty. Sometimes we do the former better than the latter. The church is known as a refuge, a safe place, a sanctuary. When these metaphors are overused, church becomes a place that is safe all right, but only for people LIKE US. Church becomes a place for those who choose to conform to a particular standard of righteousness, not a place for those who are burdened and bewildered by the challenges of life. Even in Jesus' day, this had become the norm for the religious authorities. They felt charged to keep the Hebrew people safe. They had been an enslaved people, so it was understood on a very deep level how precarious life could be. They found comfort in their rules and rituals. They thought that if they followed the pattern and the plan, they could be safe from

the darkness, protected from the very shadow of death. This is a temptation for so many of us. We substitute power and protocol for the real work of fighting the darkness when it descends on us.

Even though Jesus was protected in love by his parents and later defended by his faithful followers, ultimately he had a charge to fulfill. To be the Savior of the world, he would have to be completely committed to his task – with no turning back or turning away. What would this take? How would he do it? And how might we learn to have a faith so strong and so resilient ourselves?

The religious authorities did get one thing right, it helps to have a rule of life in place, a standard by which we set our boundaries and evaluate our decisions. But their rules had become too rigid, too static to be able to move and flex with the turbulence of real life. They were more worried about preventing people from working on the Sabbath than they were about caring for the poor or seeking justice in an increasingly demanding Empire. We've seen this play out in our own churches, in our own denomination as fighting over the rules takes the place of caring for one another in love. The intentions may be good – but good intentions can go amuck rather quickly. You've heard about the road to hell and what it's paved with, I'm sure.

So how did Jesus live so differently, so completely, and so courageously? What was his secret? How did his rule of life work when so many other standards of morality tend to fail so miserably? It worked, I think, because his guidelines for living were so simple and so entwined with God's great love and tender mercy for the world. Love God. Love each other. Love

yourself. He was OK with that being about it. His family taught him that generosity of spirit. At least I think maybe that's how it worked. I can't say for sure. Sometimes we learn the best of our ethical standards from our families, sometimes we learn the worst, or learn because of what we don't want to repeat in our own lives.

Now most of us operate on an unarticulated rule of life. Very few folks name and claim their standards for living – unless it is a pre-requisite of their church or a guideline for the community of which they are a part. My neighborhood home owners association has an unrealistic 75 page manual detailing the responsibilities of Brandermill life for anyone choosing to buy a house there. I can't say that I know it all very well, nor have I committed my life to keeping my yard and living space up to the suburban ideal. It was an eye-opener when we moved in and got “written up” for having excess yard debris after living there about a month. Nevertheless, on the faith side of things, I do try to set my intentions and live up to my own values, at least as much as is humanly possible to do so. I'm not Jesus, but I hope that my choices and preferences and boundaries are somewhat in tune with what I say I believe.

That's where we get to such biblical texts like I read this morning. We are given the impression that the Bible reads more like the 10 commandments or other lists of what we “shalt NOT do.” We imagine it to be a book for the religious authorities who seek conformity and guidelines more akin to my home owner association manual for discerning who's doing what's right and who's not picked up enough of fall's leaves and sticks in their yard. But these texts, these suggestions for living a whole-hearted life, break that mold. Grace, that is, pure love given freely, is what will train us to renounce impiety and live lives that are self-controlled. And

Colossians reminds us that this knowledge comes through Christ and is given to ALL people no matter their religion, tradition, socio-economic position, nationality or circumstance. That's why I started the reading at verse 11. It's important to be reminded that Christ IS ALL and is IN ALL. Then the author is quick to remind us, the readers, of how to live a fulfilled life: Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another. Forgive one another. Live in love and peace.

These are not things we can easily measure on the test of righteousness. And we tend to like things we can measure. We like knowing, being certain, and it helps especially to have real clarity about where we can point out other people's mistakes. This doesn't give us much of that. Mostly, it reminds us to look at ourselves and our own actions. It takes a great deal of courage, compassion, and a willingness to be vulnerable to one another to have these things happen. But to the best of my knowledge, this is exactly how Jesus lived – in this tension – and it was a tension – one he felt predominantly, not from the sinners and the outcast, but from the important people who were part of his faith tradition.

Researcher Brene Brown who has collected vast amounts of data on feelings like shame and guilt has found that the antidote to such feelings comes through vulnerability, courage, and love. Now that it's scientifically verifiable through data and collected evidence, will we believe that it's true? Her work notes that whole-hearted, vibrant living, "Jesus living" as I would describe it happens when we set our guideposts toward courage, compassion, and connection. This may be a new way of learning about this truth, but it isn't new information. It's old, old

information that comes to us through our sacred texts, but also primarily through the person of Jesus.

To live like he lived, to risk as he risked, to love as he loved is a primary goal for me, one I first heard articulated that way when I came to the Presbyterian General Assembly in Richmond in the early 2000's and Rick Ufford Chase became moderator of our denomination. His passion was that of practice, of living authentically into the Christian life. And though I have the same passion myself to live as Jesus lived, it is a goal that I fail at often. It's not the kind of goal you can put on a to-do list. It isn't a head goal, a success goal, or even a "goodness" goal – but it is a heart goal. It reminds me of the line in the familiar Christmas Carol, "Joy to the World," where it says, "Let every heart prepare him room." Yep. In order to live this kind of life, I need to make room, lots of room in my heart for Jesus - For his way of life - For his rule of living.