

"Gratitude in My Heart"
Psalm 148 and Colossians 3:12-17
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The candle is burning, the tree is gleaming,
the hymns are still carols of Christmas that we love.
The world thinks Christmas is over,
but we know it's not, and really never will be.
We have another week of formal celebration
and a lifetime to give thanks
for the Love birthed in the manger bed.
Not only do we have the fruits of Christmas to enjoy,
the secular New year is on the way,
a time for thinking about all the ways
we would like the next calendar year
to be better than the one that is coming to a close
and what we can do to resolve to make that happen.

The reading from Colossians is a wonderful choice
for welcoming the rebirth of love in our midst
and for looking toward a brand new year.
God has clothed God's-self with human life
therefore, we humans should clothe ourselves,
says the author, with the characteristics of God that Jesus reveals.
The language comes from baptism,
in which we are clothed in new ways

As Eugene Peterson put it in the *The Message*.
"Chosen by God for this new life of love,
dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you:
compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.
Be even-tempered, content with second place,
quick to forgive an offense.
Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you.
And regardless of what else you put on, wear love.
It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it."
Along with love, the other key item in our new wardrobe is thankfulness,
which the author names no less than three times.
Love and thankfulness.
How could there be a better theme for this day.
I was a bit astonished that this Colossians reading
full of wise and heartfelt advice for the church
was one of the scriptures for this Sunday,

when I am preaching here for the last time.
The letter was most likely written a generation after Paul
by a follower of his who wants to pull the Colossian Church
back to a full understanding of Jesus' resurrection.
First, he gives them a list of things not to do
based on what he's heard about them;
he has never met them himself.
None of that was part of our reading for today.
Only his positive and uplifting words
about how to live like people
who've been called and graced by God.

With New Year's resolutions right around the corner,
It might be easy to hear this text as instructions
on how to be good or how to shape up spiritually.
But that's not what going on at all.
For one thing, every instance of the word "you" in the text
is plural, not singular.
These are words for the whole body of Christ,
not the individuals who comprise it.
More importantly, far from spouting exhortations to be good,
the writer is offering encouragements to let things happen,
to support the process of living from love and not fear.

I can't think of better advice for a people and a pastor
who are saying goodbye.
As I shared in my MidWeek on Wednesday,
you have been the church of my maturity,
the one I dreamed about when I first went to seminary,
the church to which I hoped one-day
to bring every skill I had acquired,
that we might share a joyful ministry.
By the grace of God I think that has come true.
Not only that, but you have marked the end my formal ministry
with extraordinary gifts and memories that I will cherish.
Now the shelves and drawers in my church study are empty.
My book have been given to younger pastors and to some of you
just as Alan Oakley, the pastor who baptized me,
gave his books to me some thirty years ago.
I remember my sense of astonishment at that gift
and that he would ever let those books go. How could that be?
Now I understand.

The pastor who wrote the letter to the Colossians says love
and thankfulness are what produces maturity in the individual
and unity in the community (3:15).

Certainly, I leave Blacksburg Pres feeling loved in a host of ways
including the love that put up with limitations,
and I am thankful for all kinds of things:
 your ability to host mystery and practice imagination,
 the willingness of lay men and women to step up and lead;
 the high caliber of other members of the staff
 the fun we had alongside the many hours of work;
 the variety of people in the congregation
 from church backgrounds, or no church background, of many kinds;
 the ability of members and friends to allow each other
 to be in different places along the continuum of faith,
 and the attention we gave each other
 that allowed people to grow.

To me the wideness of BPC's welcome of people where they are
adds up to love of the most gracious kind.

The writer of Colossians knows that love
is what produces the peace of Christ.

He's not talking about lack of conflict or lack of hardship,
but about not having to fight to sustain one's self-image.

 Love means we can let that preposterous struggle go.

He even says the church should let Christ's peace rule.

 The word rule comes from judicial language,
 like a judge's ruling.¹ Let the peace of Christ
 be an ultimate authority for you,
 is what the author is trying to say.

I've never heard the peace of Christ spoken of quite that way before.

 Up to now I have thought of the peace of Christ
 as an ideal we share and long for and rehearse together in worship,
 not a source of authority I should be relying on.

Again, Eugene Peterson put it wonderfully well:

 Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other,
 in step with each other," he writes,

It seems wonderful to me to be learning a new way
of thinking about the peace of Christ

 for this my last sermon of my official ministerial career,
 and that constant learning is very much in keeping
 with faith and with the kind of church BPC is.

The final verses of our scripture tell the church how to sustain
lives of love and thankfulness, and again
the words couldn't be more timely for us.

What's needed, says the author, is regular worship.

 That's right. Regular worship.

That is wise advice both for you and for me.

 As a retiree, I might be tempted to take a break
 from worshipping anywhere for a time.

As people whose church is undergoing change
you might think staying away won't matter.
We would both be terribly wrong.

Regular hearing and interpretation of the Word
coupled with songs of praise to God
is the surest way to continue in love and thankfulness.
Without it we will both lose out.

Regular worship is the way to live in "a Christmas state of mind,
peaceable and wise," writes New Testament scholar Amy L.B. Peeler,
who notes there is a reason why

we do so much communal singing at Christmastime.

"To carry the songs and hymns and odes of the season
on into the bleakness of winter and then on into even
the dog days of summer takes a critical mass, a body,
to live giving thanks to God always."ⁱⁱ

The psalmist knew that worship is the core of love and thankfulness, too.

Every line of Psalm 148 is pure praise for God's works
that creates a deep sense of oneness and gratitude.

It is particularly moving to me that this joyful psalm
is the other reading for this our final day of worship.

It is as if the Holy Spirit is telling us
to move into the new year in joyous hope
with every expectation that in God all will be well.

I confess that before working on this very last sermon

I was grumping to myself and to others

how hard for Rob and I to find a congregation
where not just the ministry and the outreach

but the music and overall high level of content

was going to match what we had here at BPC. Too bad.

Worship itself is more important than any of our expectations
says this scripture. What matters is to gather with the body

and offer praise so that we can live love and thankfulness always.

So if you find yourself thinking

it's okay to stay away in the coming weeks

as substitute preachers fill in between now

and the arrival of an interim, please don't.

Show up. Take care of each other.

Offer praise to God,

and let the Spirit surprise you with guidance and care.

I promise to do the same.

Though we will be apart, we remain clothed

with love and thankfulness

And whatever you do in word or in deed,

we will do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,

giving thanks to God through him. AMEN.

ⁱ William Loder, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpChristmas1.htm>

ⁱⁱ Amy L.B. Peeler, **Associate Professor of New Testament**, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Ill.