

“Don’t drag your baggage into the New Year!”

We gather this morning in the midst of the on-going celebration of Christ’s birth. (This is only the THIRD day of Christmas. The twelfth day is not until Jan. 6th, Epiphany, when we remember the Magi and their visit to the Christ child.)

We also gather on the brink of a new year- a new DECADE, as we welcome the beginning of 2010. We are Christians. We aren’t going to just say, ‘Yay, and Happy Birthday, Jesus!’ then forget all about the Savior we follow. Christ calls us to open our hearts to his direction and wisdom as we begin another year.

The reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossian Christians gives us wonderful directives for faithful living that can guide us as we let go of 2009 and move into 2010.

Paul was writing to the Colossian church because it appears there were some problem behaviors and beliefs circulating there. It seems some of the church members were slipping into a kind of cult that focused on angels or spirits. Some of them were involved in an unhealthy, strict ritualism and ascetic practices. Others seemed to have abandoned the narrow track and moved into self-indulgence of all kinds. The second chapter of Colossians touches on both of these:

Why do you submit to regulations, “Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch”?They are simply human commands and teachings. These have...an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

So Paul, in chapter 3 tries to set them straight. He focuses on the new life in Christ that we live following our conversion. He understands that all Christians are still under construction. In our time, this is still true. Our culture doesn’t seem to struggle with drifting into rituals that are too strict, or severe mistreatment of our bodies, unless we count lack of exercise and unhealthy eating. But those are both really in the other category: self-indulgence. This is truly the temptation of our era. So we need to heed Paul’s words. They are as needed today as they ever have been.

Paul is very straight-forward and clear. Let’s remember his instructions:

Clothe yourselves with compassion. How many things you do in every day arise out of compassion? How many words that exit your mouth speak of compassion? We do feel and express compassion sometimes, but to the kids when they are late getting ready for school? To one’s spouse when he or she forgot to pick up the milk on the way home? To the co-worker who is difficult? Compassion never means letting anyone walk all over you, or mistreat you. But we are called to have

compassion even for those we need to confront or set boundaries on. Jesus wants us to WEAR compassion, like a cloak.

Wear kindness. Be kind. When I think of this, I realize that the world would be totally transformed if we passionately and firmly strove to BE KIND, to show kindness. We can disagree with someone and still be kind in our manner and words. We can even share something difficult or hard with someone and BE KIND in doing so.

Wear humility and meekness. This is so foreign to our age. Listen to most any conversation and you will hear the speakers stating everything as though it comes directly from the mouth of God. “I’m right. I know about this. Listen to me.” These unspoken messages underlie much of what we say.

When I was in seminary I had a professor who had us write down the 5 things that we would say are most descriptive about ourselves. He stressed that these had to somehow bring alive the essence of our identities. We came up with words like: *committed to Christ, honest, loving, caring, striving for integrity.* Then, after we had turned in our lists, he gave them back. The next assignment was to make a case against all of them. It felt a bit like being on a debate team that’s been assigned to make a case for a position none of the team members personally embrace. It was difficult. But it taught me something about humility. Because, you know, it actually wasn’t too hard to find a lot of evidence against what we had so easily stated about ourselves. Our eyes were opened.

Clothe yourselves with patience. Impatience catches us every day. We may manage to be patient with strangers, or with friends at school or at work. But at home? With our family members? It is much, much harder to consistently remain patient. Are we patient with other drivers on the road? Even when we have no particular reason we need to be in a particular place at a particular time, we get furious with the pokey drivers ahead of us. (The ones behind us don’t matter.)

This clothing language is a baptismal metaphor for Paul and the early Christians. The ancient ritual of baptism included ceremonially “stripping off” the old self with one’s old clothing, then “putting on” a new fresh garment after being immersed in the water of baptism.

Can we do this? Can we get rid of old stuff, old “clothing”, so that we can WEAR compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience? I’m going to switch metaphors at this point: I think we can only do this if we get rid of the baggage we are dragging around. Just after his list of virtues Paul states: ***Forgive each other, just as the Christ has forgiven you.***

If WEARING compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience is faithful living, there is no way we are allowed to drag around “baggage” of hurts, grudges, or resentments from the past.

This is a traveling season. Some of you may have visited some airports recently, or loaded up your vehicle with gifts and bags to make a visit to family or friends over the holiday. It's when we travel that we truly experience the burden of dragging around heavy bags—and conversely when we travel we discover the joy of “traveling light”.

Let's lose our luggage in these final days of 2009. Let's ask God to help us do that.

Forgiveness isn't really something we “offer” each other. We have the capacity for forgiveness only because God forgives US. We learn about forgiveness from God. God teaches us and helps us learn to forgive. The first step in this learning to forgive, is recognizing what forgiving is NOT:

Forgiving is never EXCUSING. God doesn't excuse what WE do wrong. He doesn't look at us and say, “You know, what you've done was no biggie. It doesn't really matter what you've done, it's over now, and you couldn't really help it, your childhood was messed up, you had some feelings that overtook you.....” God says “You did a GREAT wrong. It required COSTLY payment. But Christ has made that payment with his life. You are forgiven. Go and sin no more.”

Forgiving is not FORGETTING. It is asking God to enter into your experience of those memories, so that they will be reduced in power and no longer hold you captive. It is a way of cutting the painful bond we have with the one who has wronged us. It is refusing to allow that person or event define us or continue to hurt us.

Terry Anderson was a hostage in Lebanon for seven years. In his book, *Den of Lions* he tells about the healing power of forgiveness. He admits that, as a Catholic, he was often told to forgive, but the gospel never became real for him until he began to forgive his captors. “Forgiveness doesn't have anything to do with one's enemies,” he writes. Forgiveness doesn't mean there isn't any anger, but is rather, letting go of that anger. If you hold on to the anger, you hurt yourself, your family and friends. He also observed that forgiveness did not start after he was released, but while he was still a hostage.

God guides us through his Spirit as we forgive others. In Leonard Sweet's words: *We must depend on God to take our baggage and send it to a destination where it will never find us again.* .

Finally, Paul's words remind us: *Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.* Paul definitely has a way with words. You can't really demean someone in the name of Jesus. You can't brag about yourself in the name of Jesus. You can't impatiently rant at your spouse in the name of Jesus. You can't spend all your money on yourself in the name of Jesus. You can't carry bitterness in your heart and soul in the name of Jesus. You can plot revenge against

someone in the name of Jesus. You can't fudge on your taxes in the name of Jesus. You can't tell jokes that put down other racial groups in the name of Jesus. You can't nurse hatred or resentment in the name of Jesus.

I'm sure you get the idea.

Ok. We are heading into 2010. I have an idea for us. You may have heard of a child raising technique called "Catch them being good." It's totally self-descriptive. You watch kids carefully and when they are doing something you really like, you tell them. "Wow, thanks for being so patient with your sister. I am so grateful you accepted responsibility for breaking the glass. I'm very touched that you played with your cousin at the party—it looked like he was feeling left out." The idea is that we have no problem pointing out the things kids do wrong—they upset us and we give them consequences for behaving badly. But it is easy for us to overlook the good stuff. Recognizing it, naming it, praising it, helps kids to do it again!

So, here's my thought:

Let's try to catch each other being Christian. Pick a day to do this with your family. Or select a day for yourself, personally, and keep a log. When we observe compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, let's point it out! Record it in your journal. It can help us do better. It can help us be more conscious of our attitudes and our behavior. We won't be able to do anything without God's grace and help. We will lean on God more. We will draw closer to God out of our need for God's help and wisdom. As we draw closer to God, he will help us let go of our baggage.

Don't drag that baggage into the New Year-- may this truly be a new year of our new lives as God transforms us by his power and love. May this be a new year of being a part of God's redemption of the world. Amen. Amen.