

The Good and Beautiful Life
Humility
Colossians 3:12-17

All this month we're using as our grounding text one of Paul's letters in the New Testament. I'll tell you the truth: for me, Paul's letters are hard to preach from. The stories of Jesus, or the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)—they come alive. They create spaces and invite us to burrow our way into them. When we re-tell those stories, we can put ourselves inside of them.

Paul's letters can sometimes sound more like straight instruction, a call to obedience. They say, sometimes pretty directly, 'Here's how you should think about God and your faithfulness.' That's exactly what the people who received those letters, Christians in the first century, needed. It's what many people today, often in more conservative strands of Christianity than ours, are looking for. But here, I think, I have the sense you might have a little more resistance to being told what to do or what to think. Obedience is not high on our list of values, especially for adults. When we bump up against a text that sounds absolute, too certain, it raises our instincts to question and resist. What we want is autonomy—freedom of thought, decision-making, action.

And that's all good. The freedom to choose what I believe, to consider for myself the truth that resonates with my experience and what makes sense in my head, is part of why I became a Methodist. Maybe that's what you love about this kind of Christianity too.

But here's the problem: Sometimes God speaks in a voice that is not mine. Sometimes God's voice sounds radically *Other*. If I can't hear that voice, it might mean that I've made my god into a reflection of myself. Or maybe something more like a consumer product. A commodity I can select and take off the shelf—or not.

We could have a lot more conversation about this. About what makes good and valuable religion. Whether faithfulness demands of us a willingness to put away some of our resistance, to insist a little less strongly on our own autonomy. But today I mean it just as an introduction, because for the next few weeks, I'm asking you to dig in a little deeper with me into the letter Paul wrote to the Colossians.

The Colossians were members of a very young church in a city called Colossae, which was located in what we now know as Turkey. Still part of the Roman Empire, but about a thousand miles from the place where Jesus lived and worshiped and taught. Colossae was one of the earliest Christian churches. We know that because the city was destroyed by an earthquake around 64 AD, barely thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

To understand any of Paul's letters, you have to know something about the context—of Paul and of the congregation he was writing to. This was the height of the Roman Empire. It was the age of the *Pax Romana*. Citizens of the Empire had lived without a major war longer than had ever happened before. Peace was possible because of the the Roman Empire's quite impressive

progress—in the military, the economy, technology, a sophisticated form of government. Countries outside the Empire—they were really just trying to catch up—‘developing nations’, you might call them—prime for sweeping up into the irresistible advantages of the empire.

Caesar was the savior that all the empire’s subjects worshiped. Were required to worship, actually. Because stability rested on a common creed: that Caesar was the one who brought peace and prosperity to the empire’s subjects. No matter which Caesar occupied the throne, he was the good president. The gods themselves blessed his rule.

That’s the cultural context for this writing. And this is where Paul’s letter really gets interesting. Its message is disguised—so well that it’s easy to miss. But if you read closely, what you can see in Paul’s letter to the Colossians is a sophisticated, subtle argument for resistance to the Empire they lived in. A tract on how these followers of Jesus should live in an alternative truth: that it’s not Caesar who’s given them a good life; it’s God. This letter was subversive, and it was intended to be.

Listen to this opening section of Paul’s letter:

*[Jesus] is the image of the **invisible** God,
the one who is **first** over all creation,
Because all things were created **by him**,
in heaven and on the earth...
Whether they are **thrones or powers**,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.
He existed before all these things.
All things are held together in him.
He [occupies] the first place in everything.*

You talk about mixing politics and religion! Those words were nothing short of revolutionary. Kind of like the United States encouraging the Venezuelan people to say to a cruel dictator, “You are not the president of this country any more. We are going to act as though you’re not even there.”

It’s not Caesar who’s holding the world together, Paul says to the Colossians. It’s God. It’s not a more polished government that will bring peace and save your life; it’s living the way Jesus did. Lift the lid off of your hopes, Paul is coaxing them. Imagine not how government ought to make life better, but what God can do. What God *has* done. You, he says to the gathered community of Jesus-followers, are not confined by the empire’s power structures. No matter what authority Caesar assumes, you are free. To practice a different social ethic. To be followers of the One who brings real peace. So be a community that gathers and shapes itself around the life of this one who lived as God among us. Sharing a common meal, practicing an alternative economy, extending yourselves radically in service to the most vulnerable.

You are free, he is telling them. So live a good life. Not by huddling inside some self-protective bubble, but by relying on a grace that can fold in even ugly things and make them beautiful too. Be a community that paints for the world a picture of how beautiful life can be.

I read a piece from *Time* magazine a couple of days ago that said all over the country, contributions to thrift stores have suddenly increased so dramatically, that some stores are putting restrictions on how much used clothing and household goods they'll accept. People are getting rid of their stuff in massive quantities. What's the explanation? Why now? Marie Kondo, the article suggested. The author of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* recently has her own Netflix show. Have you seen it? The show is simple—even a little silly. She helps people overwhelmed by their own lives declutter. And—she giggles her way through the process. She doesn't even speak English—her advice is translated from Japanese—but somehow, she makes organizing your closets joyful.

It's not finger-wagging advice that this weary world needs. It's not even the most compelling arguments. It's the possibility of joy. Life that includes an everyday serenity, even beauty. This is what Paul is suggesting to the Colossians. Far more effective than any argument for change, it's a picture of the good and beautiful life that will draw people toward grace.

And then, Paul puts some concreteness to this image in that part of his letter we read today. Here's what the good and beautiful life looks like, he says. It looks like compassion and kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. It's the practice of tolerance when you're confronted with something you don't understand, forgiveness when you get crossed up with each other.

For just a minute, I want to hold up to the light one of those words from that sea of lovely thoughts. Humility—because I think that word is often misunderstood. Humility is one of those things we know best by identifying its opposite, pride. Both of them—pride and humility—are things that surface in our relationships with other people. Mostly with the people we're closest to. They come out in small, everyday actions, long before they accumulate into character traits. A hundred moments a day, when we insist that the world orient itself toward us, or we choose to bend.

There's a story Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells in his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, about a marriage that disintegrates over a bar of soap. In this story, it was the wife's job to keep the house in order. One day she forgot to replace the soap in the bathroom. Her oversight disrupted her husband's routine. He wanted to make his point, so he exaggerated her fault. "I've been bathing for almost a week without any soap," he complained. The wife, of course, denied, vigorously, that she'd forgotten to replace the soap. They argued. Her pride was at stake...but so was his. And so, for the next seven months, they slept in separate rooms and they ate in silence. Eventually they came back together, but even when they were old and placid, Marquez wrote, they could not speak about the soap incident, "for the barely healed wounds could begin to bleed again, as if they'd been inflicted only yesterday." It sounds silly and tragic, doesn't it? But for both those characters, pride prevented them from saying "I'm sorry." Simple words that might have brought healing.

Humility is not humiliation; it doesn't mean feeling insignificant and worthless, or being overly critical of yourself. To be humble is not to deny your gifts or your needs. It's to see them, and then give them an appropriate space. It's thinking about other people with the same attention

you give yourself, recognizing that they too bring to this moment their own needs, hurts, wants that deserve your attention.

To be humble is not thinking less *of* yourself;
it's thinking less *about* yourself.

When you meet a truly humble person, you're likely to come away thinking about how much he listened to you, how she took a real interest in what you said to her, how he seemed to enjoy life so easily, without pretension or self-protection. "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly," someone (G.K. Chesterton) once wrote.

That's a beautiful thought, isn't it?
It's the kind of beauty that can reshape us.
It's the kind of beauty that might even reshape the world.