

Sermon 8-3-25
Ed Batsel preaching

SERMON AT BELMONT UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AUGUST 3, 2025

“How Christians Can Live Through Bad Times”

Colossians 3:1-17 **THE MESSAGE**

Do you WISH THAT YOU COULD turn off the news and go back to bed and pull the covers over your head? If you have any moral sensibility at all we are LIVING IN BAD TIMES.

- The single greatest cause of death for those from 1 to 18 years of age is FIREARM DISCHARGE. Active shooters are now commonplace, in every kind of VENUE.
- Most of us would be hard put to name all of the wars of one kind or another that are going on as I speak. It is impossible to keep up with them but the result is the same on those who are affected. Ukraine and Gaza grab the headlines, but there is war in the Congo, ethnic cleansing in nearby countries, and gang rule in the capital city of Haiti.
- Oppression these days takes many forms. There are untold millions of people, as Bishop Rueben Job put it, who have known nothing FOR THEIR ENTIRE LIVES but hunger, thirst, disease and violence.
- And let's not forget what is happening now with the current administration, not only in Washington but also on the STATE level. It's like WHAT FOREST GUMP'S MOTHER TOLD HIM ABOUT LIFE: **News from there is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you get until you open it up.** The New York Times made reference last week to the CURRENT “DIZZYING POLITICAL NEWS.”
- **YOU CAN MAKE YOUR OWN LIST.**

WE LIVE IN BAD TIMES. THE QUESTION IS **HOW DO WE RESPOND? AS INDIVIDUALS? AS A FAITH COMMUNITY? WHERE DO WE START?**

The Upper Room's JOHNNY SEARS FUSSES ABOUT THIS: **I QUOTE:**

“These days, my heart and mind often feel clouded by despair due to the current state of world affairs. Wars rage, climate disasters are frequent, the wealth gap is rapidly growing, authoritarianism is thriving, and hate, fear and greed drive deep division and systemic injustice. There is much that feels heavy and uncertain. Staying engaged...(feels) like a steep climb.”

HOW CAN WE NAVIGATE THROUGH BAD TIMES LIKE THIS? I interpret today's scriptural text as giving us AN ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION.

Now IF EVER THERE WAS a group living in BAD TIMES, it was that little church at Colossae.

- The city was a Roman colony. The people there were a captured and enslaved people. Roman culture had its rules.
- All structures...FAMILY, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC...had to serve the Empire.
- And Rome was doing what all colonizers do: using all the people of Colossae for its own benefit. The city was located on the trade route from Ephesus eastward and was known for its production of high-quality wool. IF NEEDED TO GROW THE EMPIRE, COLOSSIANS WERE COMPELLED TO WORK AS SLAVES.
- And what is called THE EMPORER CULT was strong in the surrounding area. The Roman Emperor was BELIEVED TO BE DIVINE OR SEMI-DIVINE AND WAS WORSHIPPED. In Colossae, Christianity was COUNTERCULTURAL. AND if the dating of Paul's letter is near accurate, the Roman Emperor at the time was NERO.
- ABOUT ALL YOU COULD SAY ABOUT NERO WAS THAT HE HAD GONE OFF THE DEEP END!
- Sound familiar?

AND INTO THESE BAD TIMES, WHEN IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR THE FOLKS IN COLOSSAE TO LIVE AS CHRISTIANS WITH THE CARDS THEY HAD BEEN DEALT COMES PAUL'S LETTER.

WHAT YOU HEARD EARLIER IS THE NEW TESTAMENT LECTIONARY READING FOR TODAY EXPANDED JUST A LITTLE.

WHAT THE LETTER SAYS IS STUNNINGLY SIMPLE...BUT NOT SIMPLISTIC. AND IT MAY SURPRISE YOU GIVEN THE COMPLEXITIES OF TODAY'S NEWS.

ERIC LINCOLN says that for Paul, WE need not learn any "new techniques" for SURVIVING BAD TIMES AND STILL KEEPING THE FAITH. NO. Instead, Christians need "to (LEARN) HOW TO LIVE (A) CHRISTIAN LIFE"

PAUL SAYS THAT THERE ARE TWO THINGS THE COLOSSIANS SHOULD DO.

- First, KILL OFF SOME THINGS: ...greed, anger, slander, abusive language...
- Second, DRESS IN SOME THINGS...compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience...
- IN GREEK, THOSE 2 THINGS "KILL OFF" AND "DRESS IN" ARE IN THE PRESENT PERFECT TENSE. IF YOU REMEMBER YOUR ENGLISH GRAMMAR...THAT

MEANS THAT THEY ARE A PROCESS...NOT SOMETHING THAT IS IMMEDIATELY ACCOMPLISHED.

To illustrate what PAUL IS TELLING US ABOUT THIS PROCESS, I want to tell you about the faith journey of one of my favorite authors, Kathleen Norris.

She says she had a radiant faith as a child in a Presbyterian Church in western North Dakota. But early on she began to drift away and, like many Baby Boomers, she left religion altogether, went off to college and wound up in New York City.

Then, in her mid-thirties, she inherited the home where she, her parents, and her grandparents had lived. It is in Western North Dakota and she left New York and moved back.

After a time, getting to know local people, being invited to the local Presbyterian, Methodist and Episcopal churches, she wound up back in the Presbyterian Church of her childhood.

AFTER HAVING GIVEN UP RELIGION FOR 30 OR SO YEARS, WHAT BROUGHT HER BACK?

LET ME QUOTE WHAT SHE WRITES ABOUT HER GRANDMOTHER. (APPROPRIATE, don't you think since this is ENCORE SUNDAY?)

"If I had any guide in this endeavor, it was my maternal grandmother, CHARLOTTE TOTTEN. Hers was a grown-up faith that retained so much of its childhood certitude. People in my church still talk to me about the Bible studies she conducted, even though she had died 25 years ago. She was a woman of faith who was, as the saying would have it, 'no fool.' I was an unruly child, but one penetrating look from her, one sharp word...was enough to bring me back to myself and my right relation to others. I learned from her that this coming to my senses, this realigning of true relationship, might serve as a definition of a living faith. NOT A LIST OF "THINGS I BELIEVE" BUT THE CONTINUAL PROCESS OF LEARNING (AND RELEARNING) WHAT IT MEANS TO LOVE GOD, MY NEIGHBOR AND MYSELF."

AND IT IS IN THAT GETTING OUR RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT...WITH GOD...WITH OTHERS...WITH OURSELVES...THAT IS GOING TO INFORM HOW WE RESPOND TO THESE BAD...BAD TIMES.

YOU SEE, YOU AND I HAVE A CHOICE:

- We can turn off the news, get in bed, and pull the covers over our heads.
- OR we can go back to THE BASICS.

It's THE BASICS our text from Colossians is talking about. "EARTHY" THINGS, AND SPIRITUAL THINGS.

At my age...I'LL SOON BE 92...I "KILLED OFF" THE IMMORAL THINGS PAUL WANTS US TO GET RID OF A LONG TIME AGO. I HOPE YOU HAVE, TOO. (If you haven't, you have come to the right place.)

BUT COMPASSION, KINDNESS, HUMILITY, QUIET STRENGTH, DISCIPLINE? AN EVEN TEMPER, BEING QUICK TO FORGIVE, LOVE? WE ARE A WORK IN PROGRESS...EVERYONE OF US.

I have some GOOD NEWS:

1. Despite appearances to the contrary, GOD IS IN CHARGE OF THINGS.
2. And WHEN ENOUGH OF US GO BACK TO THE BASICS, when enough of us enter this process of RELEARNING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN, when enough of us start recognizing GOD IN OUR MIDST...
3. WE WILL BE GIVEN THE COURAGE TO LET GOD AWAKEN IN US CAPACITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES we did not know we had.

I'VE TALKED ENOUGH. I will consider this sermon a success IF YOU REMEMBER just the first and last verses of the text Pam read earlier:

"So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, ACT like it.

"Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way."

MAY IT BE SO...AMEN