

Parish Retreat: Gratitude is the Attitude

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Irwyn Ince

[0 : 00] It's my joy once again to welcome the Reverend Dr. Erwin Entz to preach the word this morning. For those of you who have just come in for worship, who have not been here for the weekend, we've had a fantastic time.

We've been exploring this topic, the title of the retreat, A New We, talking about what it means to have a vision rooted in the gospel, an understanding of what it means to bear God's image, to forsake attempts to seek dignity apart from that dignity that is to be found in our identity as image bearers of God, as people in Christ.

We've been talking about this ultimate vision that to bear God's image is most fully realized when the entire world, the multi-ethnic body of Christ, is joined together under His Lordship.

And we've been exploring some amazing themes, both big, grand themes, and then also asking hard questions about what that means for us at Church of the Advent. And so it's my delight to welcome Dr. Entz back.

He's the, if you don't know, he's a pastor at Grace DC. He's also the director of the newly formed Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission. And it's a delight to have you with us. Thank you, Pastor.

[1 : 20] Well, good morning, y'all. Good morning. For one last time together, at least. The time being, it has been a delight this weekend to be with y'all and getting to know y'all and enjoying all of the talents that were on display last night.

Some great pictures of some men in this congregation. I want to kind of wrap up our time this weekend looking at these three verses that were read to your hearing from Colossians chapter 3 on this subject.

Gratitude is the attitude. Gratitude is the attitude. And really, the point of this is that we live as God's people together with a daily gratitude to God as the peace of Christ rules, rules in our hearts, and as his word, the word of Christ, dwells richly among us.

So let me pray, and then we will start to dig in. Father, we thank you for your word. That's not dead, but that is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and the intentions of the heart.

Lord, our confession this morning is that we are all naked and exposed to you, the one to whom we must all give account. And that's good news, Lord, because you know precisely what we stand in need of then.

[3 : 09] So would you, through the preaching of your word, meet us where we are and give us what we need? Lord, if we need encouragement, would you be pleased to encourage our hearts in your gospel?

If we need correction, would you, in your mercy, correct us that we might walk rightly? If we need, Lord God, if we need faith, hope, would you give us those gifts that we will be people who live for the glory of Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen, amen, and amen. Let me read those verses to you again from Colossians chapter 3, verses 15 to 17.

The apostle Paul, we're catching him in mid-thought here, really. And he says, I want to tell you a brief story about a young African-American couple, Daryl and Joyce.

These are pseudonyms, it's not their real names, just protecting the innocent. They live in a densely populated urban city in America, and they're both musicians, and they met while they were each pursuing a master's degree at a prestigious conservatory here in the U.S., and together they attend a racially, ethnically diverse church in their city, serving on that church's music ministry team.

[5 : 22] And I interviewed this couple during my research for my doctor of ministry dissertation, and many of my interview questions when I would meet with people were intended to provoke an emotional and thoughtful response.

And one group of questions that continually prompted that kind of response were these. I would ask, what does it feel like to be your ethnicity at your church?

And I would get specific. If they were black, what does it feel like to be black at your church? What does it feel like to be white at your church? I would ask, how often do you think about your ethnicity at your church?

And then I would ask him, what ways has that begun to change since you began attending your church? And when I asked Daryl that question, what does it feel like to be black at your church?

He said, I can't really be black at my church. And of course, I wanted to know what he meant by that. And he said, I mean, the things that I would do if I were in a more black setting, I can't do that.

[6 : 38] I often say, if I want to worship God, he said, I'm very expressive, and I'm going to express it with my whole being. The culture of all saints' church is pretty much the opposite.

They call me to play the organ. Yes, it's the ham and be organ, but I'm not going to play it the way I would be playing it in a black church. It's a sad thing, but it's going to be something they can relate to.

And he's been a member of that church for over five years, so obviously he stayed, even though he felt like he suppressed a part of himself, a part of his identity, and he's still a part of the music team.

And when I asked, well, why is that? He said, I used to get upset that I had to suppress it. But over time, I've learned to see things from everyone's perspective.

I've been learning over the years how to deny myself. He said, I hope that it can be the other way around, too, that they can deny themselves, too, and we can assimilate across the different cultures.

[7 : 44] And then his wife, Joyce, added this. She said, I prefer to hear gospel music played. I prefer actually to play gospel music, and those things are fine to prefer, but really, at the end of the day, my growth with Christ is not about my preferences.

Actually, she said, it's a stripping away of my preferences. We're supposed to be, Darrell said, ministers of reconciliation, and we need to really see that in our city.

What does it look like in practice to live as a reconciled community, as the beautiful community we've been talking about? One of the things that is explicitly clear, if you've been paying any attention at all over the past few years in the good old U.S. of A., it's been explicitly clear that we don't live in a land where reconciliation is the norm.

You might even find yourselves this morning a little bit weary from all of the talk and the issues that surround race in this land.

You might be angered or find yourself grieving by the ongoing evidence of this enduring problem when will it end.

[9 : 04] How will the strife be done away with? We need to be perfectly clear, of course, the only true and permanent reconciler is Jesus Christ.

And what is absolutely necessary is for the members of his body, the members of his church to be ministers of reconciliation.

And that begins with his church living as reconciled community. Should Darrell have had to feel as though he had to suppress a part of his racial identity at All Saints Church?

Probably not. Should All Saints Church be aware of its preferences and how their African-American musician was feeling and what he was experiencing?

Yes, they should have been, but Jesus is the reason that Darrell can say, I've been learning over the years how to deny myself.

[10 : 05] Jesus is the reason that his wife Joyce can say, my growth in Christ isn't based on my preferences. It's based on the stripping away of preferences.

What's more, both had grown in thankfulness to God for this Christian community that they were a part of, even though things were not precisely the way they wanted them to be.

You see, gratitude is the attitude that Jesus creates in the hearts of his people. Did you notice that in these three verses, the tagline, almost like an add-on by the apostle at the end of each verse, is thankfulness to God.

There's a movement of gratitude in these three verses. We see peace and place and practice. We see being grateful in peace, grateful in place, and grateful in practice.

And this chapter, this section of Colossians, is primarily about instructions on how the church is supposed to live in light of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

[11 : 18] It's about life in the messy middle between the time that Jesus will come to set all things right.

How are we supposed to live? He starts out this chapter in verse number one, saying, Since then you've been raised with Christ, set your minds on things that are above, not on earthly things, for you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Since Jesus is the Father's right-hand man, so to speak, with all power and authority to affect God's will and to protect his own people, then the Christian life should be completely oriented by reference to him.

And he sets this out, saying, listen, that has some implications, Paul is going to say, in this chapter, that therefore, this is a life of putting off and putting on, put to death, therefore, he says, what is earthly in you because you've put off the old self with its practices and you've put on the new self which has been renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

Therefore, he said, put on, as God's chosen ones, who are holy and loved, put on tenderheartedness, put on compassion, put on kindness, gentleness, humility, patience, forgiving one another.

[12 : 57] And he says, above all these things, put on love, which is the binding glue of perfection. This life, in other words, is not about me and you as individuals, as we've been talking about.

God is not simply interested in making a new me. He wants to make a new we. And this reconciled community, Paul emphasizes in verse 11 of this chapter where he says, here, there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

They are supposed to, as this reconciled community of Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Greek, Scythian, slave, and free, that are holy and loved together.

They are to be putting earthly things to death and putting on love together across all of these differences. And this is absolutely clear in this first point, being grateful in peace.

He says in verse 15, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which indeed you are called in one body and be thankful. The desire for peace is not new.

[14 : 18] The fact that in this world we are regularly confronted with violence and injustice and war and disharmony and disruption and division is nothing new.

We long for peace, but the world has never known how to get it. And this is in part because peace is not simply calmness.

Peace is not simply the absence of strife. When we see in cities in America over recent years racial unrest and protests over racial injustice and police killings that explode into violence, when we see it in a city like Charlottesville, Virginia, do you know that before the riots, Charlottesville, Virginia was not a city at peace?

When you gather together on Sunday morning in Brooklyn in D.C., there's no violence necessarily going on outside of the windows, but D.C.

is not a city at peace. Peace is not simply biblically speaking the absence of hostility. It is the presence of something.

[15 : 38] It is the presence of well-being. It is the presence of wholeness and flourishing and prosperity. It is all things working together as they ought to.

So here, when the apostle says, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to be a Christian at least means this, it means to be at peace with God. Jesus Christ reconciles us to God.

We are God's enemies. We were at war with God. That's a losing battle, but we didn't care. That is how life apart from faith in Jesus Christ looks.

This is why Paul said in the first chapter of this letter, verses 19 to 22, for in him, in Christ, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

[16 : 56] Jesus Christ is our peace. He's our holy hope for peace with God and what that means is that in Jesus Christ, we are restored to wholeness and flourishing in our relationship with God and so Paul says, let the peace of Christ, this peace that Christ has established and brought you into, let that rule your hearts.

The command is for something to rule and the subject of that command is not you. The subject is the peace of Christ.

Ruling here has the sense of an arbitrator and an umpire like in baseball. When there's tension and difficulty among you, what is the determining factor and what you all say and what you all do?

What's in the position of calling balls and strikes in your decision-making? What is in the position and the decision-making position of do this and don't do that, say this and don't say that?

Is it your feelings? Are you driven by how you feel at the moment? Is it your likes and your dislikes?

[18 : 14] Is it your preferences? Would you please notice with me that this is something that the Colossians are to let happen, not make happen. Paul doesn't say make the peace of Christ rule.

Let the fact that we have been reconciled to God and have peace with God or a flourishing relationship with God, let that be the ruling factor in our decision-making.

He says, do not get it. Twist it. You are called to this in one body. You didn't call yourselves into this life. God called you into it.

God placed you in this one body. It's not even your body. It's the body of Christ. You've been called into peaceful existence in this body and you're only a part of it because God called you and placed you in it.

Were it not for the blood of Jesus' cross, we would have stayed apart because of differences and divisions. The pursuit of what makes for peace only happens to live in a position of gratitude for that peace.

[19 : 31] peace. When he says and be thankful, it's not a throwaway lie. What he means is keep on being thankful.

Keep on being thankful for the peace that Jesus Christ has made for you with God for life in this world by his blood.

keep on being thankful. Let that be the decision-making authority when you relate to one another in his body.

Being grateful in peace is intimately tied to being grateful in place and when I say being grateful in place, I'm talking about the same place that the apostle is talking about.

He says in verse 16, let the word of Christ dwell richly, richly, that is live in you all richly in all wisdom as you teach and admonish or warn each other.

[20 : 35] He doesn't say let the word of Christ dwell in your hearts, but that's what he means. He's still talking about what is at the center of our decision-making in our life together.

Notice he says let it live in you, let it live in you all richly with all wisdom as you teach and admonish each other singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude.

With gratitude where? He says with gratitude in your hearts to God. The peace of Christ is supposed to be the head honcho if you will, the decision-making power in your hearts and now he says the word of Christ is supposed to flourish there and letting the word of Christ dwell richly among us isn't simply about memorizing scripture verses that you can apply to various situations.

I'm all for memorizing scripture, right? We are people of the book as it were. The Bible is our only rule for faith and for practice but the word of Christ here is related to the peace of Christ in verse 15.

I like the way Chaplain Blackman, the chaplain at Wheaton College put it recently when he spoke on this passage. He put it this way.

[21 : 59] He says let the verbalized, vocalized announcement of God about what Jesus Christ is doing and who he is, let it be the telling influence of your control tower, the executive center of your being.

let it be the telling influence of everything that you think and act and do. It is the living voice of Jesus Christ.

The peace of Christ is ours because of the word of Christ. The word of Christ is God's declaration of who Jesus is, what he's doing and why he's doing it.

Let this word, the apostle says, live among you all richly. So don't just read your Bible. In other words, hear the voice of your Lord. Hear the voice of your Lord.

Realize it is the living word of the living God and it shouts to us about God's reconciling and renewing all things in Jesus Christ.

[23 : 11] And letting the word of Christ live in us is to be done. He says, with all wisdom, when the peace of Christ is our decision making and the word of Christ is flourishing among us, we will engage one another with all wisdom.

We won't simply be walking around quoting Bible verses at each other to correct one another or try to fix an issue. And listen, biblically speaking, wisdom is not just about knowledge.

It is the skill to apply what we know in a way that enables life to thrive. And he's doing something intentional here, the apostle is.

He's setting them up. Look at what he said in chapter one verses 28 and 29. At the end of the chapter, he says, him we proclaim, Christ we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Paul says, for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. He's talking about himself as an apostle. I'm working hard to proclaim Jesus Christ to you all, warning and teaching with all wisdom.

[24 : 27] The purpose is your maturity in Jesus Christ. And now, when we get to chapter three, he says, this isn't just for me to do for you. This is for you all to do with and for one another.

He uses the same words that he used in chapter one, with all wisdom, teaching, and warning each other. In other words, he said, don't only look to me as an apostle.

As the peace of Christ rules in your hearts and the word of Christ is lavishly living among you, God will grant wisdom so that you can grow in maturity together.

together. This dwelling of the word of Christ with all wisdom as you teach and warn each other actually happens when we come together for worship.

It happens when you're singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. The teaching and the warning actually is happening when the body of Christ comes together for worship.

[25 : 34] Isn't it wonderful that he calls out our corporate singing as a particular way in which we let the word of Christ live richly in us as a way we teach and warn one another.

Like, what do you think when you come to church to sing? What do you think is happening? Do you just think about you and God on an island together? just me dwelling and worshiping God?

Does it work into your praise to be thinking about the people of God you are among when you are worshiping, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs?

Is it generating a gratitude in your hearts? A thankfulness to God for the community in which he has placed you.

When we come together we're able to help each other be grateful for the peace of Christ that's been given to us. We're able to help each other be grateful that we're called together in one body.

[26 : 47] We're to help each other be grateful that God has opened our ears to hear the word of Christ. We're to be grateful in the place we're to be grateful in the place that God has captured to help each other be grateful in our hearts.

And lastly the apostle commands us to be grateful in practice. He expands this attitude of gratitude to the entirety of our lives and whatever you do in word or in your work do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Yeah, yeah I know gratefulness in your hearts to God when you're singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs together in worship but he's like look, look, look whatever you do in word or in work in word or in deed do it all do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him.

In other words this attitude of gratitude is to spill out of Sunday worship into everyday living. The rubber is to meet the road in our daily lives.

So let me kind of wrap this up with an example of what gratitude in practice looks like from something I was blessed to see and hear just a couple of years ago from a good friend of mine a brother pastor during a time of racial tension in his city my brother Howard Brown who pastors Christ Central Church in Charlotte North Carolina back in September of 2016 he was interviewed in a local for a local TV news program to discuss the racial tensions in his city.

[28 : 45] the city just exploded in protests and there was violence and the reporter said to him he said he said pastor you have a very unique position in that you have police officers in your congregation yet you also have congregants who are very frustrated with the police and pastor Brown said he said correct the work we do is the work of reconciliation so we have open and honest discussion and we believe that we serve a God and we have a gospel that can handle any kind of dispute in any kind of issue and then the reporter said but what is the challenge for people even he said even people of faith what is the challenge is reconciling their spirituality reality with real life right now in which a lot of people feel disenfranchised and feel like they're targeted actually being killed by faith pastor Brown said he said what the community of faith needs to realize and communicate to people out there is this you have a God who is highly concerned and upset at the oppression he's highly concerned about the issues that people are going through but he also recognizes that it is impossible for us to get the justice that our souls and our situations deserve so he was willing to go to bat for us through the work of his son

Jesus Christ we believe that the question we need to ask is is there space and room not only in our churches but in our gospel message for those folk who are in the street who are really hurting and he said this the only difference between you and the folk who are running in the street is the degree of mercy and grace that you've received that you fail to realize you are no better you are no more moral you simply are being given a grace of God in a different situation that is not of your own doing what pastor Brown was describing is what gratitude in practice looks like gratitude in practice particularly when it's rough around the edges when there are disputes that bubble over into tension and hostility is a recognition that I have been given a grace from God that is not of my own doing that I have received peace with God through Jesus Christ and this governs the realities of my life day in and day out and what that means is I walk into these situations with humility

I don't walk into them as I know it all having all of the answers and would you notice that there's no escape clause the apostles have been giving them lists in this passage in Colossians chapter 3 and now in just in case anybody might think that there's a loophole he says whatever you do in word or in deed do everything everything as we say everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ giving thanks to God the Father through him do you know particularly when you're trying to pursue beautiful community when you're trying to pursue it in the church when you're trying to pursue it in your community it's a lot easier to give thanks to God the Father through Jesus Christ when things are going well this particularly has has has has pointed power when we are dealing with difficulties and divisions and differences and hostilities and we ask the question what difference is Christ making among us what difference is the presence of the peace of Christ making among us are we learning like Joyce when she said

I'm learning that my growth in Jesus Christ isn't about my preferences is actually quite often the opposite it's about the stripping away of my preferences gratitude is the attitude that God calls us to gratitude is the attitude that God calls us to to live out the reality of the peace that we have been given by him through faith in Jesus Christ the peace that we have with him that is to just flow out into a pursuit an active pursuit of peace with another as we live as one body with gratitude in our hearts to God let's pray Father thank you for your peace you pray Lord that it is indeed the ruling factor over our hearts as your people we pray

Lord God that we grow in gratitude and in love for one another and for our neighbors as we worship your holy name being reminded that you've done for us what we could not do for ourselves and we pray Lord God that this this gratitude for this peace would just rush out into the daily aspect of our lives every day all day to the praise of your glorious grace in Christ's name amen let's rise and sing song number four and so to