

Cat Goodrich  
 First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL  
 July 15, 2018

Summer of Love: *Love Begins at Home*  
 Colossians 3:18-24; 12-17

There is an image in the bible that I love, one which doesn't get much traction these days:

The image of the chaff and the wheat.

Anyone who lived in an agrarian society like ancient Rome would know what we who buy our flour in bags and our bread from a bakery do not: when it is harvested, the edible grain of wheat must be separated from the inedible husk surrounding it. To do this, it was often tossed in the air in a wide basket, so that the wind would catch the paper husks and blow them away, letting the valuable wheat fall back into the basket.

Studying scripture is a bit like harvesting wheat. Much of it is valuable, but some parts should be swept away by the winds of time, so that we are left with that which is true and timeless.

Not that this is the water we swim in. We all know plenty of people who are convinced of the complete inerrancy of the Bible. The "Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it" mindset. But the Bible says some pretty strange things. From the book of Exodus – you shall not permit a female sorceress to live. Or from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings – Elisha the prophet is teased for his baldness by some young men, when two bears come and maul forty-two of them.

The Bible is a complex document, the result of many prophets and priests, scribes and historians and other faithful people writing down how they have come to know and understand God. Insofar as it contains testimony about God's action in and through history, I do believe scripture is divinely inspired. But, just as one must sort lentils before cooking them on the off chance a pebble has found its way into the bag, sometimes the cultural context or biases of the author influences the text in a way that makes me scratch my head. As faithful people, we must take on the work of sorting and winnowing - discerning what is important to keep and what we let go of.

Of course we are part of the equation, too. We also come to scripture wearing our own lenses of culture and class and context that impact how we read and make sense of the story. I don't wear glasses, but I've got some serious lenses – that impact how I read this particular passage. As a feminist, in a marriage that aspires to equality, with two daughters who I dream will grow up to thrive, in a society where women's wages lag and leadership positions are so often beyond reach, and in a political context that no longer views domestic violence as a credible threat for an asylum claim even though Latin America is consistently one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. Given all of this, one might conclude that this text is one I'd like to see carried off by the

winds of time, relegated to the trash bin in the annals of history. And I didn't even say anything about slavery.

AND YET ... I had a theology professor, Kirk Wegter-McNelly, who liked to say that part of our work as people of faith is to mine the tradition for concepts that are True and useful and even beautiful. I believe that there is something beautiful and subversive we can take away from this passage. There might even be some good news.

This is one of what Martin Luther called the *Haustafeln* texts, the household codes of the New Testament that prescribe specific virtues for relationships within families and households in ancient Rome. Listen to the verses that precede our passage – (Colossians 3:12-17).

Did any of your parents have last-minute reminders they'd give as you said goodbye before going somewhere? My mother used to send me off to college saying, remember who you are, and whose you are. Paul is in prison, writing to advise the Colossians how they are to behave to remain true to their Christian identity in the midst of challenge from the outside and conflict within their community.

He wants them to steer clear of a cult that has gained influence in their town – a cult that scholars think espoused strict aestheticism and dietary taboos as a path to holiness. Paul says – no no no. Faithfulness is not about deprivation. New life in Christ is liberating, we are free in Christ! He paints a picture of the rich relationships made possible in true Christian community: relationships characterized by gratitude and forgiveness, and above all, *love*. But, keenly aware of the risks involved with challenging the status quo (he is in prison, after all), Paul reminds the church not to be so excited about the liberation Christ offers that they forget their place in society.

Stanley Hauerwas calls Christians *resident aliens* – in the world but not of it. So, from the outside, men and women and children and enslaved peoples are to remain in their social stations. But their inner lives are transformed by the love of God in Christ.

Wearing our 2018 Warby Parker frames, it's not hard to see why this is problematic. How can we espouse submission to the partner who bellows and bruises his way through life? How can we encourage strict obedience to parents in a world where addiction and neglect are far too common? And *slavery*?!

Maya Angelou said we should “do as well as [we] can until you know better, then when [we] know better, do better.” We know better. If we can extricate this passage from its hierarchical cultural trappings and look past its traditional gender norms, I think we can hear it proclaim a simple truth: *love begins at home*.

Christ offers us the love of God, forgiveness and grace of God, and reconciliation. Each day, we have the opportunity to practice forgiveness and reconciliation with those to whom we are closest, to cultivate peace from the inside out. The Word can take root and

grow in the fertile ground of loving, respectful, and grateful relationships: between spouses, in families, with colleagues, and friends.

I don't know about you, but Oh, my family. My poor family. They have to deal with the worst of me. My morning breath. The temper that runs short when I'm tired. My tendency to forget clothes in the washing machine, my righteous indignation about the behavior and policies of certain political figures who shall remain nameless. We humans can put on a good face for the rest of the world, but at some point, we "stop being nice and start getting real." This means we have plenty of opportunities, from when we turn on the coffeemaker in the morning to when our heads hit the pillow each night, and for some of us, every wake up in between, to practice the compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love Paul writes about.

The power differentials within ancient Rome's highly stratified society made life particularly brutal for women, children, and enslaved peoples. That is one reason why Jesus's inclusive message of love and liberation found such traction within those groups. The reality at that time was that resistance to roles and challenging social order was risky at best... Paul was writing from prison, remember? The reciprocity Paul prescribes – addressing both partners, both parents and children, both slaves and slaveholders – is a way of subtly encouraging resistance within Christian communities, lived out through love and respect for one another.

Sharing love in our homes, in relationships with those to whom we are closest, is a form of resistance today also. Think about it:

Cultivating gratitude for what we have in a consumerist culture is a form of resistance.

Offering forgiveness in a world hell-bent on vengeance is a form of resistance.

Being patient and compassionate despite the demands of a fast-paced workplace is a form of resistance.

Listening to the voices of the young and the old in a culture that ignores them is a form of resistance.

Honoring our partners and treating those we love with respect is a form of resistance these days: resistance to the ways of the world where relationships are cheap and life itself is devalued.

Paul's words to the church, then and now, offer a way to build the kingdom of God from the inside out. By practicing love, grace, forgiveness, humility, and gratitude each day, the peace of Christ is made real in our lives. The transformation is not immediate.

Rather, day in and day out, little by little, the Spirit remakes us into the people we were created to be. THAT is very good news. And even better – in changing ourselves, we change – God changes – the world.

