

Teach One Another

Colossians 3:12-17

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Learning is a life-long process. When we're kids, we learn from our parents. Sometimes we learn the lessons of responsibility. At other times, the lessons are unintended. Then, when we're parents, we learn from our kids. There was an e-mail that circulated a few years ago that listed some of the things we learn from children. You may remember some of those lessons:

There is no such thing as childproofing your home. A 4-year-old's voice is louder than 200 adults in a crowded restaurant. VCRs do not eject PB&J sandwiches. The spin cycle of the washing machine does not make earthworms dizzy. It will, however, make cats dizzy. Cats throw up twice their body weight when dizzy. Lessons learned.

As Christians, the learning never ends -- we are told that we are to grow up into Christ in every way. So, as we begin this new program year with an emphasis on Worship, Grow and Serve...our Pathway to Discipleship...let's think this morning about how we learn, what we learn, how we grow in our life with Christ. Let us pray.

We thank you, our loving God and Savior, that you give us everything we need so that we may know you and may know you in ways that change our lives. We thank you for Holy Scripture that shows us who you are and what you want us to be. We thank you for your Holy Spirit who teaches us all things and reminds us of everything you said. May we pay attention, for the sake of Jesus our Teacher and Lord. Amen.

The Christians in Colosse loved to learn stuff. The problem was that they were learning things that were getting in the way of their understanding of Jesus and the life to which he had called them. They were confused about the truth of the gospel and Paul needed to instruct them properly. They were in danger of making Jesus just a part of their lives.

There was so much culture in Colosse -- all sorts of philosophical and religious systems were floating around. Apparently the Colossians thought they had an intellectual duty to learn them all...to incorporate them into their own worldview. They desired spirituality (that's something we hear a lot of these days). In their quest, some sought ecstatic visions that would set them apart from everyday folks. Or, maybe they would become involved in ascetic life-styles that would just shout "Holier than thou!" They were in danger of buying into the culture du-jour. To head off that danger, Paul writes this letter to warn and to teach.

He wants them to know three things. First, they need to know that Jesus is fully God -- all of God is in all of Christ. If they want to know anything about God, they just have to look at Jesus, who is the spitting image of God. They don't need to look anywhere else for God. Second, they need to know that on the cross, Christ did everything necessary for their salvation. Christ didn't start a process that they have to finish nor do they have to do anything to earn that salvation. And third, there is a great spiritual freedom for all of those who are in Christ. And that includes the liberty to live in a new way that pleases the Lord.

That's Colossians in a nutshell. With great excitement Paul tells them that if they learn more and more of how God works, they will then learn how they are to live and work. In the words of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, Paul tells them: You received Christ Jesus...now live in Him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught."

So, how are we taught? How do we learn? We learn from one another. This is a fact. We may learn the things we should...we may learn things that are harmful, but we do learn from one another. I've told this story before, but it bears repeating. In my church in Louisville, the senior high guys played a practical joke on a Sunday when they were serving as ushers. They replaced the offering with Monopoly money when brought it forward for the prayer of dedication. This did not please the senior pastor so I was given the job of 'talking' to them. When I asked how they came up with this particular prank, they said, "All we ever hear in this church is how evil money is and all we see is that everyone is consumed with making it." That's the kind of learning from one another that we need to avoid.

Paul uses two words: teaching and admonishing. The definition of teaching is pretty straightforward, but it had a specific meaning and purpose in Greek culture. It certainly meant a continual and ongoing transmission of practical or theoretical knowledge that becomes so incorporated that it is second nature to the student. But it also had a purpose -- education was to serve the state. Students were to learn things that would advance the cause of the state.

At a later time in Greece, the purpose of education was self-fulfillment -- you learned to become a better you...enjoying life with a sense of self-fulfillment. To teach, for the Greeks, was to have an effect on the intellect: to show what, to show how, to point out what was wrong.

Now we get to admonishing. This word makes us uncomfortable. It has all the comfort of being summoned to the principal's office, doesn't it? But it's really a good word. Today, we might say coaching. It implies warning, soothing, reminding and correcting -- things that coaches do. The biblical language here divides the tasks. Teaching has an effect on the intellect, but admonishing is supposed to affect the will and the disposition.

So, together we are to be helping each other learn and grow -- to correct thinking, to put right what is wrong and to improve our spiritual attitudes. Our teaching and admonishing is to show one another who Christ is and who we should be...what we should become.

It is clear from this passage that one of the ways in which we teach and admonish...coach...one another is by demonstrating to each other just exactly what this Christian life is like. That's why Paul tells us in those earlier verses to put on the Christian graces of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. It is teaching by example...it is living into Christ. This is not easy, but we cannot talk about grace without giving grace.

I was in Panama about 25 years ago and went out jogging. I didn't think anyplace could be more humid than Houston or Key West. I was wrong. After the run, I left my running clothes in the bathroom, hoping they would dry out and then left the house. When I returned, my clothes had been washed, dried and folded by my host's housekeeper, Clara. I protested that she need not have done that. Her reply? I have received kindness, so I give kindness. What she did taught me a lot about living in gratitude.

This passage, Colossians 3: 12-17, is the most requested scripture I have for weddings. It makes sense and the way I usually preach it is to draw attention to the great clothes they are wearing for that special day. And why do they put away ordinary clothes and put on new and extraordinary clothes? To show that they are moving from one way of life into another way of life.

And so it is with those who have been given new life in Christ -- we put off our old ways of living and put on...clothe ourselves in...these Christian graces and virtues. To do this is to teach and to teach in a powerful way the truth that Christ redeems us and restores us. It is interesting that in the lectionary, this passage falls on the first Sunday after Christmas. The reason given is that this Sunday is close to New Year's and New Year's means resolutions. What better time to resolve to live the Christian life more fully...and really mean it? But I think that it falls on that Sunday because Christmas is when Christ put on human flesh so that we could put on Christ.

Teach and admonish one another. Do it by showing what this new life in Christ is all about. Demonstrate Christ's forgiveness by forgiving and receiving forgiveness. Teach and admonish one another, but we cannot do it based on what we feel or prefer. This is where admonition gets a bad name. We often indulge our frustrations by admonishing people when they do something we don't like...when they don't measure up to our personal standards. This is what led Christian writer Calvin Miller to write in his book, *The Philippian Fragment*: Dolores had the gift of admonition. Most wished she had never unwrapped it.

You see, there is a qualifier with this command. Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and that wisdom is Christ. That's why we are told to "let the word of Christ dwell in us richly." What we dwell on eventually will have an effect on us. It will come out in tangible ways.

During my senior year in high school, we lived next door to my trigonometry teacher (who was none too happy to be living next to a preacher and his family). He was without a doubt the most boring teacher to ever walk into a school building. He taught by holding the textbook in front of his face and reading it in a slow monotone. If he needed to put something on the board, he never lowered the book. He just rotated to the blackboard, wrote and rotated back. Disney audio animatronics sizzle with life compared to George.

When I had him, we played chess very quietly and got away with it. Two years later, however, my sister had him. My sister is brilliant, but she wasn't much of a student. She sat in the class and as he droned on, she kept saying, over and over in her mind, "Shut up, George." She was surprised at one point to hear that very thing shouted out right in the classroom, only to be horrified a nano-second later when she realized that every eye was on her. George had even lowered his book. What she dwelled on came out. What consumes us works its way into our thinking and behaviors. If we do indeed become what we behold, then what we behold is crucial.

So, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly! Develop practices of regular reading and study of scripture. That's why we have the readings on the back of the bulletin. It only takes about fifteen minutes to read them. You won't notice much difference at the beginning, but you will over time. We have learning opportunities for you – head on down to Stone Hall after worship to the Grow Expo to find a place where you can engage in study of the Bible. It's that important.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly! But that involves more than just learning what it says. It means paying attention to what it says and deciding that you will submit your will to the will of Christ that is revealed in it. A Taiwanese pastor friend of mine said that it's not enough to understand the scripture... you must also stand under it. Take it to heart and each time you read it, ask yourself, "What does this mean for me today? What is God saying to me, teaching me this day?"

We learn in this community of faith...we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ by teaching and admonishing one another according to the wisdom that is ours when we let God's word into our hearts, and minds and wills.

I was fascinated with a story that appeared in *The Washington Post* a little over two years ago. Scientists in Bristol, England, discovered a certain type of ant that, when it found food, would return to guide others, to teach them where to find the food. As they observed these ants, they noticed that each time a follower-ant got its bearings, it would tap the leader-ant with its antenna and they would proceed to the next lesson. The ants were only looking for food, but the researchers said the careful way in which the leaders led followers turned them into leaders in their own right. They said that an animal is a teacher if it modifies its own behavior in the presence of another, at cost to itself, so that another individual can learn more quickly.¹

It was clear that they could have gotten the food more efficiently if they had just done it themselves, but they persisted in teaching others. They could have even dragged the other ants to the food and that still would have been three times faster than that teaching exercise. Still, they taught. This is discipleship on the ant hill.

Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom...as God's word settles deep into your heart and mind, like those little ants, your life will change and it will change in the presence of others – your friends, family and this congregation. And it will change at great cost. It will take time and will require trusting the Holy Spirit to give you the will to do it when you would rather indulge other instincts.

But, it will be noticed and others will learn about following Jesus from you.

The ants teach and admonish each other so they can grab the food at your picnic. It's not so different for us – we teach and admonish, encourage and coach one another so that we can find our way to the Bread of Life. Jesus, at great cost to himself, came for us to show us the way back to God. In gratitude, let us teach one another how to follow Jesus – it's discipleship on our ant hill. Amen.

1. *The Washington Post*, Monday, January 16, 2006, Section A, page 8.