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## Spiritual Resistance

Colossians 3:12-17

A sermon preached at Duke Chapel on December 30, 2018 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

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A very earnest student was struggling with going home for Thanksgiving. The issue wasn't transportation or schedule, but rather a growing disparity between his values and that of his parents. Especially on the topics of race and sexuality. So with great earnestness and angst, and as part of a class discussion on the topics of race and sex, the student asked "When I go home, how do I talk to my parents? What can I say in relation to these issues which are so important to me?"

The two other facilitators of the class that day were professors closer to my age than that of the student. We turned to one another, paused briefly, and then practically in unison said "Avoidance! Avoidance is your friend. Please do not talk about these issues at the holiday dinner table. It is not your job to convert your parents over a two-day break. And especially when you know there are points of deep disagreement, don't poke at the sore spots. Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners are not the time to address or aggravate painful disagreements. Talk about the weather, the food, your grandmother's beautiful dress."

In our house, when my in-laws were visiting recently, we ended up talking about my son's martial arts class. These conversations usually evolve into me encouraging William to demonstrate some of what he is learning, then devolve into my attempts to imitate him, or worse take him on. William is 6'4". Fortunately, our amusements end before I get hurt.

For the student concerned about Thanksgiving, the advice was specific to a particular time and place. Holiday dinners are not the time to raise the most challenging family issues. The time for those conversations is later, when the stress of the holiday is past, when busyness of celebration is over, and a calm, reasoned conversation is possible.

That student could rightly come back and ask a different question: "The holiday is past, now what?" Indeed, we have celebrated the birth of our Savior. Now what?

The Colossians reading for today gives an answer to this question. The letter to the Colossians, like many of the letters in the New Testament, was written to address a problem. We are not exactly sure what the problem was, but something was weird and something was wrong. The Apostle Paul had not been to that church, yet this letter, written in his name, addresses concerns about their beliefs and actions. Theologically, the people were being pushed and pulled in a variety of directions. Traditional Jewish teachings mixed with Greek mystery religion, and both of these influenced those who were following Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> At that time, some teachers encouraged a rigorous discipline of asceticism and self-denial<sup>2</sup> as a means of reaching greater insight into the mysteries of God. And the "notion that the universe is composed of celestial powers that rule life"<sup>3</sup> was widespread. The Christians were being

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Century Bible Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* by Ralph Martin p. 18-19

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p. 9

<sup>3</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 2214

falsely taught that even though Christ had come, additional practices or disciplines were necessary. Further they were told of powers in the world that Christ had not defeated. The author pleads with the Colossians saying “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit” (Col 2:8a) and instead encourages them to see all that Christ had done for them. Jesus was fully God, and in him they had all that they needed. Jesus Christ was and is sufficient, and believers are to trust him alone. The author of Colossians asserts the primacy of Jesus. The letter is an effort to steer the people away from what is weird and wrong in their culture.

The Colossians are not the first nor the last people to live in a culture that is not particularly conducive to Christian faith. They are not the first nor the last to be to find their faith pushed and pulled in directions they don’t expect. For instance, we, too, live in a culture in which distinctions between religions are frequently and sometimes, profoundly, blurred. I knew a woman who claimed to be both a Wiccan and Methodist -- I am really not sure how that works. Some appropriate religion as if it is a cafeteria, picking up a little of this and a little of that. Others such as Karen Armstrong, have made a career of claiming that all religions are essentially the same. Armstrong<sup>4</sup> developed the Charter of Compassion in 2008, which claims that “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions.”<sup>5</sup> While Armstrong’s efforts to encourage peace, respect, and compassion are honorable, Colossians reminds us of the uniqueness, the divinity, the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and that our faith is much more than a commitment to compassion.

In our day, while the weird blending of religious traditions can challenge our faith, it may also be hard to hold onto our faith in the midst of all that is wrong in the world. We see tyrants and corruption, warlords and violence, spin doctors and deceit. Negative influences seep into our souls and the voice of evil clamours for attention. How do we confront it all? What can we do? We are in the “what now?” time and avoidance is no longer the answer.

Perhaps the answer is spiritual resistance.

I learned this phrase from Rabbi Elana Friedman<sup>6</sup>, the campus rabbi here at Duke. The context was a Shabbat service after the shooting this fall at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.<sup>7</sup> People of all faiths were invited to “Show up for Shabbat” the weekend after the shooting, to attend the weekly prayer service. The sanctuary in the Freeman Center on campus was packed. While parts of the service were unique to the particular moment in time, much of the service was the familiar prayers which are offered every Friday evening. In her brief comments that night, Rabbi Elana encouraged us to be loving and kind in the face of hatred and violence, and claimed that such behavior was spiritual resistance. In the face of what is wrong in the world, it is an act of resistance to live in ways that are good, true, and holy. The way to counter evil is to love. The way to confront what is wrong, is to live in the way that is right.

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<sup>4</sup> Charter for Compassion, Karen Armstrong, <https://charterforcompassion.org/about1/karen-armstrong>

<sup>5</sup> Charter for Compassion, Overview, <https://charterforcompassion.org/charter/charter-overview>

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Friedman, <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/blog-entry/meet-rabbi-elana-friedman>

<sup>7</sup> “Hate crime charges filed in Pittsburgh”, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/27/us/pittsburgh-synagogue-active-shooter/index.html>

In Colossians, the readers are encouraged to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Their lives are to be marked by forgiveness, love, peace and gratitude. These are the attributes that show their new life in Christ, and demonstrate that the One born in Bethlehem is sufficient to change lives. In another letter, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21) In recent times, Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr puts it this way: “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.”<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, there are many examples of those who do this admirably.

In China, authorities are cracking down on unofficial churches, especially those that speak of civil rights. Earlier this month, a well-known church was shut-down, with Bible confiscated, the school closed, and the pastor and two dozen others detained. On Christmas Eve, a member of the church, a rice seller went to worship at a friend’s house, the only place he felt safe to celebrate the birth of Jesus. He commented, “We will not forfeit our faith because of suppression by the authorities.”<sup>9</sup> Worship was his spiritual resistance.

A few days before Christmas, a church in Raleigh was vandalized. Nothing was stolen, but the communion table was overturned, the Christmas tree knocked over, and something was poured into and on the organ and piano. When the pastor was asked about who might be responsible and how they should be held accountable, he said, “I’m less worried about holding them responsible and more worried about reconciling and helping to heal ... We’d love to love them.”<sup>10</sup> A desire to love in the face of destruction.

And here in Durham, my hairdresser, who I recently learned is also a blogger, shared her writings with me. We had been talking about her upcoming double mastectomy, when she told me she was writing in response to her illness. When I read her work, I was surprised to find a prayer of thanksgiving. She gave thanks that her illness came not in the busyness of youth, when her children were young, nor in later years when she may have less strength to confront the illness. She is grateful that the illness struck her not her daughters, and that it is teaching her to be more empathetic.<sup>11</sup> Gratitude is a tool in confronting cancer.

We are called to overcome evil with good. We are called to constantly and continuously<sup>12</sup> put on the virtues of love and forgiveness, even when, or especially when, a variety of influences are pulling us in the opposite direction. Scripture tells us to “clothe [ourselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” (Col 3:12)

If we read this list of virtues out of context, parts of it could seem as if it is a character education list that could be posted in any public building. It may appear to be a list of “shoulds”. We should be kind and

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<sup>8</sup> Center for Action and Contemplation <https://cac.org/about-cac/missionvision/>

<sup>9</sup> New York times, “As China Cracks Down on Churches, Christians Declare ‘We Will Not Forfeit Our Faith’”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/25/world/asia/china-christmas-church-crackdown.html>

<sup>10</sup> News and Observer, “North Raleigh church doesn’t let vandalism get in the way of Christmas”, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article223493730.html>

<sup>11</sup> Prayer for thanks 프로필 sunny-nam 2018. 11. 4. 10:34 이웃추가본문 기타 기능

<sup>12</sup> Phrase used in *Christ, The Church, and the End* by James Eford

loving. We should -- by way of our own, individual, hard-working, grit-our-teeth-effort -- be loving, forgiving, and grateful. And sometimes, by our own efforts, we are these things. Often, however, we fall short. This is where the good news comes in.

This is not a task we do alone. The writer of Colossians is convinced that we have everything we need, right now, in the person of Jesus Christ, to live lives of love and gratitude. There are no special tricks or requirements to get there. No key disciplines or practices. No ingredients are missing. No waiting is necessary. It is possible now, not by sheer human effort, but rather by the gift of God in Jesus Christ. Colossians tells us that we have died with Christ and have been raised with him. Imagery that reminds us of our baptism. Our lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3) An accomplished fact. Part of what the letter of Colossians is striving to do, is to convince the readers that Christ alone is Lord and that they, and we, have been raised with Christ to new life. A new life that has already begun, right now. So we are able to put on these virtues because of what Christ has already done for us. God is with us.

We also find that we are not alone in responding to this call because of the community of faith. The reading from Colossians makes me wish there was a Southerner’s translation of the Bible. Everytime the passage speaks about what “you” should do, it is a plural you, a “y’all” If we had a Southern translation of the Bible it would be clear that the call to lives of love, forgiveness, compassion, and gratitude is not for us individually, but rather for us as a community. One writer puts it this way:

“To celebrate the coming of God in one’s behavior all year long is a communal event... To live in a Christmas state of mind, peaceable and wise, is to live counter-culturally, and you cannot maintain that on your own for long. To carry the songs and hymns and odes of the season on into the bleakness of winter and then on into even the dog days of summer takes a critical mass, a body... that can teach and admonish one another to live giving thanks to God always.”<sup>13</sup>

This is a project we do together, with Jesus Christ, and with each other.

It is spiritual resistance to put on love, forgiveness, and gratitude in the face of all that is weird and wrong in this world. It is what God did in being born in Bethlehem, in the midst of an occupied land filled with tyrants and corruption. Out of, and by way of, great love, God came to earth to conquer the powers of sin and death thus bringing new life to all.

In doing so, God has demonstrated that “There is nothing stronger than a heart that loves.”<sup>14</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup>Amy L.B. Peeler in Working Preacher.org  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1506](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1506)

<sup>14</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 22