

"Christ's Christmas Decorations" Colossians 3:12-17

December 30, 2012

1st Sunday After Christmas

It's funny but the Christian Church often finds itself doing just the opposite of the world during the Christmas season. For example, during the month of December, the world is in high gear in terms of celebrating Christmas. The Church, on the other hand, is, at the same time, observing the season of Advent which emphasizes contemplation and repentance. Just when the world is ready to stop celebrating Christmas on December 26th, the Church begins to officially celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas until January 6th. And, when the world, this past week, began removing decorations, taking down lights, and throwing Christmas trees away, it is the time for the Church to begin decorating. But the "decorating" to which I refer does is not the decorating of trees, yards, and houses with lights, ornaments, and tinsel, but to the decorating of our lives with good works and Christian virtues.

Having heard the phrase, "God loves you just the way you are," so often, we may get the idea that God doesn't care how we live. We may think that, just because we aren't holy, striving to live a holy life is not important. That is a total misunderstanding of God's will and the Gospel. God desires us to live holy lives in obedience to His Law. The Gospel is never an excuse for continuing to live as we have always lived in the past. It is never a justification for sin.

However, living an obedient life adorned with Christian virtues is more than difficult for us to accomplish. It is impossible. To go back to the analogy of decorating, our lives, by nature, are like a bare Christmas tree. We make the tree Charlie Brown picked look stupendous in comparison. On our own, we have no shining good works. Our lives are not adorned with virtues. We have sin instead of good works. We have a sinful nature instead of a virtuous nature. We are spiritually dead.

At Christmas, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the first chapter of John's Gospel says. He also writes, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." (John 1:4) Jesus came into

this world to bring life to a world that didn't even know it was dead. But He did this in a most unusual way. He gave life, not by being born as a baby, but by growing into an adult and dying. His death was the sacrifice and payment for our sins. That which brought death into our world and into our lives was forgiven and taken away. Jesus came forth alive from a grave three days later so that we might have life in the way God always intended for it to be – in harmony with Him and with one another.

That new life was given to each of us in our baptisms. The Scriptures say, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Gal. 3:27) We have Christ. We have His holiness. We have His life.

But that life is not to be bare – devoid of good works and Christian virtues – any more than a Christmas tree is to be bare – devoid of lights and ornaments. As we put lights and ornaments on a Christmas tree, our text says that we, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, are to put good works and virtues in our lives. More accurately, we should say that it is God who decorates our lives with these good things for they are His gifts to each of us in our baptism. “It is not the case that one does what is holy in order to become holy. Rather, one who *is* holy through faith in Jesus Christ will consequently *do* what is holy.” (Deterding, p.160)

What are the ornaments of our lives? Our text lists them. First is compassion, the sympathy and sorrow we have for those who are suffering. Then comes kindness – being good and helpful to one another. There is humility which is displaying the mind of Christ in viewing others as more important than ourselves. Next comes meekness which is the strength to deal gently so as it be of help instead of offending another. Patience is bearing with others despite their defects. This brings with it the ability to forgive when one is offended just as the Lord has forgiven us.

The love which God has for us and which we are to have for one another, binds all of these other virtues together in perfect harmony. When there is conflict, the peace of Christ will rule. The word for “rule”, in the Greek, was used for judging in court and for officiating in athletic contests.

Therefore, we can say “the peace of Christ is to ‘referee’ or ‘adjudicate’ conflicts or disputes within the body of Christ.” (Deterding, p.146)

This ornamentation of our life in Christ this way seems impossible. It goes against our selfish and sinful human nature. But this life is not about us and our weakness. It is about Christ and His power. This life is only possible when this life is lived “in Christ”, that is, a life joined to Christ.

We are joined to Christ and given that new life in baptism. But, because of the continual temptations of the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures and the presence of sin and evil around us, that new life in Christ needs to be continually fed, nourished, and maintained so that good works may be done and Christian virtues may be practiced. To go back to the analogy of a living Christmas tree, bringing the tree into your house is only the first step. You must continually add water to the base of the tree to keep it fresh and alive. If you don’t, the tree will dry out and be incapable of supporting decorations. It will just die.

What is the source of nourishment for the Christian life so that it may be adorned with good works and virtues? It’s not moralistic pep talks from the pulpit or music that simply makes us feel good. It is the Word of Christ which is to be proclaimed and sung for the joy, edification, and building up of Christ’s holy people.

Paul says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” Notice that he does not say read the Bible occasionally, get confirmed, or go to church once in awhile. That would be like watering a Christmas tree every 4th day – helpful, but not enough to sustain life. The Word of Christ is not to touch our lives but dwell in our lives on a continual basis. One commentator wrote, “It is not merely to be read, commented on, and the like, but it is to be internalized so that it is continually present. Believers are to live, think, and exist in relation to the Word of Christ. It is to empower and norm everything about their existence.” (Deterding, p.146)

Even singing and music is to serve that same purpose. Music’s primary purpose is not to sound good or to make us feel good. Music is to proclaim the Word of Christ loudly, clearly, and

strongly just as the sermon is. We are to sing psalms, which are the very Word of God; hymns which confess the Word of God; and spiritual songs which are called that because they are vehicles for the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Word of God.

When we are so thoroughly entrenched in the Word of God and when the Gospel is so internalized by us, then the good works which God desires will come forth in our lives. And our lives will be adorned by the virtues in our text. It will not be by our doing, our effort, or our strength. It will only be by the will of God, the grace of God and the power of God. For, where we are powerless, God is not. Where God's grace is extended so is His power. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." The Gospel has the power to save us and the power to adorn our lives with good works and virtues.

The physical decorating of our homes and church for this Christmas season may very well be coming to an end soon. Lights will be taken down. Decorations will be stored away. However, may the spiritual decorating of our lives which Jesus was born to bring never come to an end. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly and the Gospel internalized by you throughout the coming new year. Let the light of Christ shine in your lives so that those lives may display good works and be adorned by Christian virtues always. Those are Christ's gifts and Christ's ornaments for you. Amen.