

# FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

First German Evangelical Lutheran Church

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## Let the Word Do Its Work

### Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.<sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.<sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.<sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.<sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

As I realized this would be my last opportunity to proclaim God's Word from the pulpit here at First German, I had thought about selecting a special section of Scripture to serve as my parting words to the congregation. When I looked at the second lesson of today's readings, however, I realized I didn't need to look any further. These words of the apostle Paul serve as the perfect final encouragement for me to give to you. In short, the Holy Spirit is saying through this passage: let the Word do its work—dwelling in you by faith and producing a rich crop of good works.

The apostle Paul, who penned these words, had many roles in his life. Perhaps above all, though, he was a pastor. He had a pastor's heart. He was deeply concerned about the spiritual welfare of all those who belonged to the new Christian congregations, which were springing up all around the world. In the words of our reading today, we see the apostle Paul's concern for the Christians in the town of Colosse. This congregation had been started by one of Paul's converts named Epaphras. The congregation had come under attack by anti-Scriptural teachings, which led Epaphras to visit Paul in Rome and bring him a report of what was happening. With his letter to the Colossians, Paul is encouraging them to remain rooted in God's Word and not be led astray by any other teaching. This emphasis is clear in the verses we have for us today. We'll begin by focusing in especially on the first words of verse 16 because everything that is said in the other verses of our reading really hinges on these words:

*“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.”* Let the Word dwell in you. The apostle Paul prayed the Word of God would be living and active in the hearts of those Christians.

The way that this would happen was by their constant exposure to the Word. The apostle gives an example of how they can be exposed to the Word when he writes: *“as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”* The music that these Christians were singing was more than nice little tunes. It was music with a message. And the message was the important truth of the gospel—the heart and soul of Scripture. As they sang God’s Word, it made a home in their hearts. Certainly there were other ways for the Word to take root in their hearts as well. They heard it proclaimed as they gathered together for worship. They read the Scriptures—the Old Testament and the portions of the New Testament which were already circulating among God’s people. By constantly exposing themselves to the Word of God, the Word dwelled in their hearts by faith.

It is equally as important for you, as members of First German congregation, to let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. The Colossian Christians were not the only ones who faced spiritual attacks from without and within. We live in a world and a culture that not only speaks contrary to God’s Word, but actually mocks and ridicules many of the basic teachings of the Bible. This anti-Scriptural influence in our society is so pervasive it can easily creep within the walls of this congregation. For this reason, it is so important that you always remain in the Word of God. You can do this by exposing yourself to the Scriptures in as many ways as possible. You can sing some of the songs, hymns and spiritual songs the apostle Paul mentions in our reading. You can hear the Word proclaimed from the lectern and pulpit in worship. You can come together for Bible Study and growth in the Scriptures. You can read the Scriptures in the private setting of your own home with your family or by yourself.

There are so many opportunities to let the Word dwell in you richly, and yet there is also such a great temptation to do the opposite—to give the Word a minimal amount of attention. There is such a temptation to think: “I already know what the Bible says. Why do I need to hear it or read it again?” There is such a temptation to take for granted the teachings God has revealed to us in his Word. As you give in to those temptations, you cut off the Spirit’s opportunity to dwell in you richly. We know that God works powerfully in the hearts of his people. But we know he does not work outside of the Word and the Sacraments. Through the Word, God shows you your Savior Jesus and speaks the peace and forgiveness that you need to hear.

Through the Word, God guides you in your daily living and shows you the way to a life of contentment and happiness, rooted in his love. Through the Word, God gives you the strength and encouragement to fight the spiritual battles that come to you every day. Let it dwell in you. Let it be a constant part of your life. God will bless you through it.

With the other verses of our readings, the apostle Paul shows what it looks like in the lives of God's people as the Word dwells in them richly. The Word produces works of faith and love. In the first verses of our reading, the apostle Paul uses the picture of putting on different layers of clothing as he speaks about the fruits of faith the Word produces. This should be a picture that we in Wisconsin are very familiar with. He writes, *"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."*<sup>13</sup> *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* With the Word dwelling in their hearts by faith, the lives of those Colossian Christians would become a reflection of God's love and mercy. They would display kindness, compassion, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness. And then the apostle writes: *"Over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."* Love is the key ingredient in a Christian's life which makes all of his other actions pleasing to God. This love is a result of the love God has revealed in his Word.

This list of virtues we see in these verses is one that we would all do well to read and reread a few times each day. The more we display kindness, compassion, patience, humility, the more we give evidence of the Word dwelling in our hearts. And, of course, over all things there must be love. In that word, we have the fulfillment of all God's commands. As you strive to show perfect love to each other and to those outside the church, you reflect Christ's perfect love for you. This is not always easy. You could go through any of these virtues and think of times when you have not showed that in your life, but done just the opposite. You fall short of God's standard. You sin. That is why it is all the more important to let God's Word dwell in you richly. In the Word, you are assured that those sins are forgiven. You are given the comfort of the gospel and also the encouragement to turn away from those sins and strive to live more Christ-like lives every day. Let that Word dwell in you richly and let it produce works of love among you.

I'd like to close the sermon this morning with the same thought that closes our reading today. The Spirit tells us: *"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through*

*him.*” Life presents us with a multitude of opportunities and challenges every day. How we face those opportunities and challenges and the choices we make is what makes the difference. Here we are told exactly how to face every opportunity and challenge of life. The apostle Paul says, “Whatever you do, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus.” What does it mean to do everything in Jesus’ name? It means that you first of all recognize the all-important role that Jesus plays in your life. He is the one who has given you life—both physical and spiritual. He is the one that gives you the ability to speak and move and act in the first place. Your goal should be to glorify him with those words and actions. It also means that you look to Jesus and his Word for your comfort and your guidance as you face the joys and sorrows of life. And, finally, it means giving thanks to Jesus for every opportunity that comes your way. Not every experience of life is pleasant or exactly what we planned, but by every experience, God is doing something for us. He is teaching us, training us and ultimately leading us to our heavenly home.

After today, the opportunities and challenges you face as First German congregation will be somewhat different than the opportunities and challenges my family and I face as members of our new congregation in Louisiana. But my prayer is that we would all face those opportunities and challenges in the same way: by letting the Word do its work—letting the Word dwell in us richly and produce works of faith and love in us. May you always remain rooted in that Word until we see each other again—either here on this earth or in the glories of heaven. God bless you. **Amen.**

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Pastor Steven Hahm  
pastorhahm@hotmail.com  
920.684.0101