

Christ-Shaped Lives
Colossians 3: 1-11
Ann Hatfield

While linguists don't know exactly, test results indicate the average person's vocabulary ranges from 20,000 – 35,000 words. For most of us, our vocabularies increase as we mature. A typical 3-year-old recognizes about 1,000 words. By age five, it jumps to 10,000! Researchers find most adults will learn almost one new word a day until middle age. At that point, our vocabularies basically stop growing.

That may be somewhat discouraging to hear, but do not despair!! Today we are going to fight that stagnation trend in our vocabularies. Just last week, I encountered a new word in a daily devotional: "*odadvertise*." "O – D – D" Oddvertise – as in, don't just settle with ordinary, run-of-the-mill advertising for your business, product, or idea. If you really want to grab people's attention, ODDvertise.

Apparently, one way to *odadvertise* is to incorporate curse words for extra emphasis. The author of the devotional – a minister – is wondering about including swear words in a capital campaign description. If an elevator is desperately needed to provide everyone with full access to the sanctuary, is it appropriate to use expletives to raise funds? How creative should congregations be to engage folks who appreciate a sprinkling of crude language?¹

I am not sure what the apostle Paul would think about *odvertising* for the sake of the Gospel. However, in today's passage Paul is confronting some serious problems with public discourse. Words were important in the first century, and they remain so for us. Our words matter.

As we work through our study of Colossians this summer, today we move into the beginning of chapter three. Here Paul begins to describe how Christians ought to think and behave because of our relationship with God. This is not intended to be a to-do-list to obtain God's love nor a way to earn salvation. Rather, we are to receive what God ALREADY has done for us, and then live in grateful response to God's amazing gift of grace. In other words, become what you already are IN CHRIST! The image Paul uses in this passage is one of baptism.

As Presbyterians, the sacrament of baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Jesus Christ, which includes the ideas of cleansing, renewal, dying and rising with Christ, and incorporation into the body of Christ – the church. While at Westminster we typically celebrate baptisms by applying water with the hand and by pouring, our denomination also allows for baptism by immersion.²

An incredible aspect of immersion is the visual symbolism of our dying and rising in Christ. As people are lowered into the water and it closes over them, it is as if they are buried in death. Then emerging from the water, they are resurrected to a new life – raised to new life in Christ.³ Often, we declare as the Assurance of Pardon Paul's words from 2 Corinthians: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see,

everything has become new!” (5:17) This is the radical transformation Paul also describes in these verses from chapter three of Colossians.

Paul encourages us to “put to death” and “get rid of” the earthly things like impurity, greed, malice, and abusive language. The term “earthly” here refers to all that destructively corrupts God’s good creation. These are the behaviors that damage relationships. They are the actions that destroy what connects us in community.

The old life is like a suit of ill-fitting clothes that is no longer comfortable or appropriate. If we have found new life in Christ, then the old life is not needed. Old behaviors should be taken off and discarded. A new wardrobe – new patterns of behavior – should be put on in their place.⁴ Behaviors to be removed are those that separate us from God and from our neighbor – even from people within our families.

That reminds me of the couple who had an eye-opening conversation about anger in their marriage:

HUSBAND: When I get mad at you, you never fight back.
How do you control your anger?

WIFE: I clean the toilet.

HUSBAND: How does that help???

WIFE: I use your toothbrush.

As we know, people handle their anger in VERY different ways.....!!

The last three items in Paul’s list relate to speech. He mentions slander, abusive language, and lying. Poet Emily Dickinson said, “I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word.” Words are powerful. They can inspire or injure; unite or divide. Words can encourage understanding, promote healing, and bring reconciliation. They can express our deepest longings, motivate people to stand against injustice, and galvanize a nation behind great causes.

In particular, Paul highlights the telling of lies in this passage. The Gospel is about truth, so there is no place for lying in the Christian community.⁵ Framed in a positive way, Christian speech should be kind and true. We focused on KINDNESS during our Women’s Retreat this year. A significant take-away from the weekend was the reminder to ask three questions before speaking: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

As God’s beloved community, you and I are to address one another with love and respect, not with anger, wrath, or malice. To be Christ-like – to be Christ-shaped – you and I should rid ourselves of slanderous and abusive language. We are to strive for a level of decency and civility in our dialogue with one another – whether in our households, congregation, or public discourse – a level that acknowledges each of us as a child of the Living God. Modelling this in and for the world may be one of the greatest witnesses we have in these days!

Letting go of ill-fitting behaviors usually is easier said than done. Like the story of the man walking along the edge of a canyon, when all of a sudden, he slips. As he falls over the

edge, he manages to grab a tiny branch. Clinging to the shrub, he yells to God, “Lord, please help me!” A voice from heaven says, “If you believe in Me, let go of the branch.” The man thinks for a moment, and then yells back, “Is there anyone else up there???” For many of us, it often can feel like we are barely holding on, as we ask questions and seek a closer relationship with God.

Recently, I finished reading *Searching for Sunday*. It is one of three books, along with *The Tech-Wise Family* and *Waking Up White*, we suggested as possible summer reading. (It’s not too late!!) In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans describes her journey of first loving, then leaving, and ultimately finding the church again.

As one reviewer commented, “Evans has written a spiritual travel guide for religious runaways,... as she leaves home, wanders, questions, suffers, and then returns.”⁶ Listen to the words of Rachel Held Evans, as she describes the sacrament of baptism:

Baptism declares that God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life, so if you want in on God’s business, you better prepare to follow God to all the rock-bottom, scorched-earth, dead-on-arrival corners of this world – including those in your own heart – because that’s where God works, that’s where God gardens. Baptism reminds us that there’s no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It’s just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair.⁷

During her quest, Evans explores the places where Jesus has always been found – where the outward signs of God’s invisible grace can be seen and experienced – in bread, in baptism, in God’s Word, and in community.⁸

In community, which is where Paul will leave us this week – in community.

The ancient world was full of barriers. And yet, Paul writes, “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free.” (vs. 11) IN CHRIST, all these barriers are broken down. If Christ is through all and in all, then anything that separates people from one another has been removed and abolished. The social distinctions of the world become irrelevant. Paul declares that God’s presence and love go out to the ends of the earth. Christ embraces everyone and everything. Nothing lies outside the sphere of God’s sovereignty.⁹

According to Paul, the discrimination, exclusion, and division that characterize so much of our world should have no significance for Christians. The Gospel demolishes every barrier we might imagine – race, religion, gender, age, culture or ethnic background.¹⁰ If we believe Christ is through all and in all, then language that is dehumanizing, racist, or hateful, has no place in the vocabularies of those who follow Jesus. If our words motivate violence, then Paul says get rid of them.

Prayerfully, there will come a time when a Domestic Violence Center is not needed in Chester County or anywhere in God’s good creation.

It has been clear for ages that politicians can easily be tempted to use excessive rhetoric and hyperbole to get more attention – to “ODDvertise” their message, if you will. But truth be told, you and I probably have used excessive language a time or two, as well. Paul calls us to model something different for ourselves and for our leaders. Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

South African president Nelson Mandela offered these words of hope: “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”¹¹

So, while we do not know exactly what the future looks like, we do know who holds the future – a God of love. God who is in the business of bringing dead things back to life. God who reaches down into our deepest graves – into the darkest corners of our hearts. God who brings us up out of our anger, prejudice, fear, and despair, over and over again, day after day ... after day.

At Westminster, we frequently say the best gifts come wrapped up in flesh. This happens in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God’s Word. Thankfully, it also is true of each of us, as we are shaped more and more into the likeness of Christ. If indeed, we are raised in Christ – and rooted in Christ – then our lives will bear good fruit. Let us trust God to garden in our lives this week, bringing forth love, peace, kindness, and self-control – the behaviors that reflect Paul’s promise that Christ is all and in all. May it be so. Amen.

¹ Donna Schaper, “Cursing,” *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, Accessed online July 30, 2019.

² *PCUSA Book of Order*, Directory of Worship, W-3.0402: Theology of Baptism and W-3.0407: The Act of Baptism.

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 171.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, 177-178.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Prison Letters*, 179.

⁶ Nadia Bolz-Weber, Cover endorsement of *Searching for Sunday*, by Rachel Held Evans, 2015.

⁷ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, 21.

⁸ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, xiv.

⁹ William Barclay, *Letters*, 180-181.

¹⁰ Wilton Gregory, Washington Archbishop, Quoted by Adam Russell Taylor, “The Corrosive and Malignant Danger of Remaining Silent About Racism,” *Sojourners*, Accessed Online August 2, 2019.

¹¹ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: the Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, 1995.