

Colossians 3: 12-17 & Luke 2: 41-52

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This beautiful passage is from a letter written in the name of the Apostle Paul to the people of the church in Colossae, one of the early churches that got started during the time of Paul's ministry. They were just beginning their life together as a worshipping community, as the body of Christ. The letter addresses "God's chosen ones." Now, some of you may be comfortable with the word "chosen" and don't have any problem with it, because you know, you are a pretty sure, you are a good Christian and therefore counted among "God's chosen," as should be.

But my sense is that this word "chosen" makes more than a few people feel uneasy, because we somehow hear it as... well, if there are "chosen" ones, there must be those who are, unfortunately, "not chosen," and we worry about them; or some might worry that they themselves might not have made the cut. We know how awful it is to be "not chosen." Remember those days in the gym class or in the school yard, playing a team game. All the kids who want to play gather around the two leaders, who get to "pick and choose" who they want on their team: I take so and so, then so and so, one by one... Even after *you've* been safely picked, you're anxious for those who would be left till the end because nobody wanted them. It's the tough reality of the ways of the world; the choice is made based on the individual merit; one's potential to be an "asset" to the team. If you weren't picked, that's because you weren't as good, or desirable, or valuable than those who were picked before you. How much worse must it be to be "not chosen" by God?

This exclusive and strictly binary, either/or understanding of what it means to be "God's chosen ones," is a sad and tragic misunderstanding that takes away the "good" from the Good News of Jesus Christ, because the Gospel, the good news, is that God does NOT choose according to our merit, our ability or our capacity, or our track record of performing for God.

Rather, the Good News of Jesus Christ is that, in choosing to take a human form and be born into this world in Jesus Christ, God chose to redeem the whole world, not just the Frozen Chosen Presbyterians and Episcopalians, or any stripes of Christians for that matter, but the whole world. Even, and especially, the Grinches and the Scrooges of the world, as if God heard Tiny Tim who said “God bless us, everyone.”

Of course I’m not saying this because of Tiny Tim, but the Scripture makes it quite clear in this passage, where we heard some beautiful descriptions of the life of a community that is “chosen, holy and beloved” of God: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other, topped off with Love and Peace. How richly beautiful, how heavenly.

And those folks at the church in Colossae were not chosen by God *because* they had achieved those. Rather, this letter is clearly urging them to put on those qualities, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.” These qualities would mark their new identity, as individual Christians and as God’s beloved community. Because God has chosen them, loves and calls them holy, they are to strive to live out those qualities, putting those qualities on as if they’re their new clothing. We, too, are called to this.

God is working with pretty raw material that is our humanity with all our flaws and brokenness. Yet God chose to come to us to redeem and restore our humanity through Jesus, as it were, hands on. If we know God has chosen you, loves you and calls you holy, and that loving gift of God came in the human form in Jesus Christ, our response is grateful and joyful praise, opening ourselves to be transformed by him.

Now listen to the Gospel according to Luke 2: 41-52: how Jesus’ arrival in our midst, as one of us, unfolded. Luke 2: 42

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, ‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.’ He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that **I must be** in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he said to

them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Luke began his Gospel with the stories of the birth of John the Baptists and Jesus. The Spirit of God was very much involved in both cases; both women became pregnant in quite unexpected and extraordinary ways, angels and prophets were involved to witness that their births were part of God's plan to make good on God's promise to Israel. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy at the voice of Mary, and the young, vulnerable Mary boldly praised God for lifting up the lowly and doing great things through her. Then, as we heard on Christmas Eve, an angel appeared again to announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds in the fields, and a multitude of heavenly host joined in praising God. At church we try to capture this magical atmosphere of the sequence of events through candlelight service of lessons and carols and Christmas pageant.

Yet, once Jesus is born and everyone had gone home, this magical air subsides. Years passed and in today's passage, we meet Jesus at the age of 12. In Jewish custom a male child became a man at age 13, so Luke's point here is that Jesus was still a child. Luke is the only Gospel in the Bible that has a story from Jesus' childhood, and from his brief account, the family seems to have led a fairly ordinary life.

Even this incident of Jesus having gone missing is very human and down to earth, at least from the parents' perspective. I remember when my mother lost my little sister. A group of mothers and grade-school age kids from my neighborhood went on a daytrip to see a play at a theater in the next town. When it was time to go back, my little sister, barely a kindergartener then, was missing. I remember trying to keep up with my mother who went frantically looking for her, running through hallways and slamming open each door in the bathrooms. It turned out my sister HAD gone back with other friends in the group. Or, I have heard more than one version of the story of how, in a large family traveling in a van, a kid got left behind at a gas station: an inverse version of the movie Home Alone. We can relate to Mary and Joseph as the panicking parents and their relief upon finding their missing child, Jesus. They must have been furious, for Jesus should have been old enough to have told them if he was going to hang out in the Temple longer.

Even the way Mary lets out her anxiety and scold Jesus reveals how she was also an ordinary mother. To put more weight into her scolding, she begins by saying “Look, your father and I have been searching for you...” This is very much our world where Jesus got in trouble.

What is odd is Jesus’ reply: ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that **I must be** in my Father’s house?’ These are the very first words of Jesus recorded in the Bible, and they reveal Jesus’ dawning sense of who he was. Jesus was 12 going on 13, at an age young people start to ask existential question of “who am I?” Jesus had come to affirm that he belonged to God even more fundamentally than he belonged to his earthly parents, and the house of God, the Temple, was where he was meant to be, as he was growing in knowledge and wisdom.

Without anyone telling him “You are a child of God,” he had come to embrace that identity, learning obedience to God, even as he was obedient to his earthly parents.

And this same Jesus, in the same Gospel of Luke, would later teach his disciples to also call on God as “Our Father” when praying. Jesus, growing up in this world of broken humanity, in a real human household, raised by very human parents to whom he remained obedient as a child, tells us we, too, are children of God, while being very human.

We are not Jesus, but the Son of God became as we are, so that it is not only possible but is our calling to live as a child of God as he is. While we may not be working miraculous healing, we, too, are called to bring healing and peace to this world. How? By clothing ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other, topped off with Love and Peace. What Child Is This? The Child is you and me whom God has redeemed in Christ Jesus who came to be one of us.