

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Living Heaven On Earth Tenth Sunday After Pentecost August 1, 2010

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Colossians 3:1-11

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things--anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

You sometimes hear someone use the phrase "heaven on earth" to describe a blissful or wonderful experience. They're trying to express something extraordinary, something outside the usual way things go every day. It's as though the perfection of heaven somehow invades this drab world and lights up the situation. "Heaven on earth" sounds like an ideal, idyllic way of life. I think it feeds into a common misconception that Christianity encourages people to aspire to some idyllic heavenly state and pay no attention to this world.

At first glance, in our reading from Colossians this morning Paul seems to be telling the Colossians and us to do just that. In verse 2 he says, "**Set your**

minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” But ignoring earth for heaven is not at all what Paul wants us to do. Rather, he’s insisting that we live out the life of heaven, the life of Christ himself, on this earth, for this earth.

Paul’s focus in these first eleven verses of Colossians chapter 3 is on how we do that. Of course, the life of Christ is a life of purity and moral goodness. We’re to be different than we were before we were Christians. But how?

It might help to note that Paul has just finished warning the Colossians against the mistake of thinking a Christian is to overcome their sinful thoughts, desires and behavior by will power and self-imposed discipline. The last verse of chapter 2 reads, **“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.”**

No. The wonderful truth of the gospel is that the key to living the Christian life in this world is Christ himself. It’s who Christ **is**. And it’s what he **has** done, what he **does**, and what he **will** do.

Who is Christ? As Chuck reminded us two weeks ago, “Christ is Our Everything”. He’s the creator, the sustainer of all things, the victor over death, the reconciler of all things, the head of the church, the image of the invisible God, Lord of all creation.

What has he done? He has lived on this earth in perfect obedience to his Father, the center of which was suffering and dying on the cross for our sins. He was raised from the dead and has ascended to the Father’s right hand.

What is he doing? He is eternally alive with the Father guaranteeing our forgiveness and righteousness to the Father, and the Father’s love and favor towards us. He is alive to continually cleanse us from our sins as we confess them to him, and to bring us God’s strength and comfort and guidance as we seek him in prayer and in his word. He is living in us in his Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us for more complete obedience to him every day.

What will he do? He will come at the end of time to bring us to himself and bring God’s judgment on the sin and wrongs of this world. He will replace this world of misery and pain with a deathless and joyful eternal world.

Jesus Christ is God’s agent. His eternal purpose is to spread his own holiness and perfection to a new human race. He is the perfect first citizen of a new human race who will one day be perfected in his image. Through faith in who he is and what he has done, God gives new birth as his own children to those who

come to Christ in faith. We are new creations in Christ. As Paul says, our life—our real, eternal life—is hidden with Christ in God.

The life of Christ in this world is hidden from those who don't know Christ. They don't see it around them, and much of the time, I'm sorry to say, they don't see it in the Church. But I think much of the time the life of Christ is hidden from us Christians as well. We're continually aware of our bad attitudes or our sinful thoughts. We're stung by our self-serving motives and behavior. We confess our sins to God and receive his forgiveness, and yet we find ourselves sinning again in the same ways. We're weak and helpless to reform ourselves.

Which is exactly where the life of Christ appears. He loves us too much to let us think that our own paltry efforts at self-reformation will bring us any relief. His costly death and awesome resurrection are the only way we can be changed into the glorious and free and complete human beings God created us to be. Christ's life in us comes out in our repentance, in our prayer, in our abandoning our own ways for his ways, in our giving of ourselves for others.

When Christ died, so did those who put their trust in him. They put their trust in him and in him alone for their life in this world and the world to come. When he rose from the dead, so did they. In our communion with him daily in prayer and repentance and listening to him in the Scriptures, in our costly obedience to him, we learn more of his perfection, more of his bottomless love, more of his infinite patience with sinners, more of the glory that he has thrust us into.

That's why Paul says we're to put to death this list of sins he calls "earthly" in verses 5 and 6. These are general, garden-variety categories of sin, as common as dirt: **"fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient."** God's wrath was poured out on Christ's body on the cross for these very sins, which the Colossians had practiced before coming to Christ. When he comes again, Christ will judge the unrepentant world for them and every other sin.

But the wrath of God isn't just visible in Christ's cross, or in the final judgment. These sinful lifestyles are themselves are the wrath of God. There's a saying that "virtue is its own reward", that doing good and living right brings good to a person. But the opposite is true too. Living sinfully brings bad consequences to a person. When people wilfully separate themselves from the one true God and persist in living and thinking and behaving in ways that pervert and distort God's true image in themselves, their humanity deteriorates. Selfishness and greed damage relationships. Following their own desires instead of those of the God

who made them, they make themselves less and less like him. Misery and heartbreak and oppression and ruin are the result. Human beings left to go their own way become less and less human. The wrath of God is all around us. It's not hidden. It's in full in our world where God's beauty and dignity in human nature is degraded and defaced.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ gives people a **“new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”** These are not just pious words. Being a fully human being is serious business. It means being the **“image of our creator”**. The word here is *eikon*, which means an image that exactly corresponds to its original in every detail. All human beings, Christians included, are imperfect images of God because of our sin. But because of who Jesus Christ is, what he has done, is doing, and will do, we have hope for this world and the next. He continually renews the new self we've been given through faith in him. As we daily repent and receive his forgiveness, seek his will, and serve him in this world, we are changed more and more into his likeness. Through him, as we worship him and serve those who have separated themselves from his love and care, he lives his heavenly life in us on earth.

God has reoriented the entire human race around Jesus Christ. You may have seen how iron filings randomly scattered on a sheet of paper suddenly align themselves with the magnetic field when you touch the underside of the paper with a magnet. In the same way, in Christ, human beings are no longer related to one another primarily along lines of ethnicity, or birth, or social status. In Christ, they are related to each other for only one reason: Jesus Christ.

Christ's purpose for St. Matthew's as a congregation and for every one of us here today is for this world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian who was executed by the Nazis for participating in a plan to kill Hitler, understood that. God's purpose for him was to resist the evil that had overtaken his country. God's purpose in Christ is to live the life of heaven here on the earth for the earth and the people on it.

Bonhoeffer was a profoundly spiritual Christian, but he said, **“[Christ] does not lead man in a religious flight (i.e., escape) from this world to other worlds beyond; rather, he gives him back to the earth as its loyal son.”**

God has given every disciple of Jesus Christ the life of heaven to live out on earth for the good of others. Our Mission Task Group even now is working hard to focus on what God would have St. Matthew's as a congregation and as individuals, do in living out his life for this world in which he has placed us. Please

pray for the Task Group, and pray for yourself as well, that the Lord strengthen and direct you to live out his heavenly life here on earth. Amen.