



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Confident for the Future
A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

August 1, 2010
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

Colossians 3:1-11

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So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 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!

This is the Word of the Lord!
Thanks be to God!

Patrick, has this ability to see what's there, even before it's really there. I don't mean to say he 'sees things' that aren't there but rather, that he sees what is possible – the potential in something that I'm likely to pass over.

We moved into the Mossy Creek manse in late November and when spring came, we began to notice what was growing and blooming around the house. Just behind the patio was a big area filled with Iris that had been planted long ago. As we looked closer we realized that the dirt was contained by a large cement basin. We later learned that this cement basin had once been a pond put in by a minister and his wife many years ago. For me this was interesting information about the manse's history. For Patrick this information became a seed for a vision: a vision of a pond and waterfall just outside our kitchen window. I shook my head – *couldn't see it; didn't really want to see it*. One day I came home to find the basin empty, a big pile of dirt and the iris gone. I shook my head – *what a mess*. Next he filled the basin with water, looking forward to the next step: adding fish and water plants. By morning the water was gone; the basin had a crack. I shook my head – *told you so!* He created a liner and filled the basin with water again. By morning the water was gone; the liner wasn't sturdy enough. I shook my head. *Really – I told you so!* Then he bought a liner and filled it with water. By morning the water was still there! Out of an old metal wash tub he made a reservoir and connected it to a pump, burying the lines. He carefully placed rocks, hiding the liner and creating a natural looking landscape. He turned on the pump and the water from the reservoir flowed into the pond. He added water plants and a few fish from a creek nearby. The plants bloomed and the fish grew. And, I stopped shaking my head and began to sit by the pond, feeding the fish.

I couldn't see the pond that Patrick saw our first spring at Mossy Creek; what Patrick saw guided his effort. He was not deterred by my head shaking or the troubles he ran into along the way. In fact, I believe those things just increased his energy to make a pond out of that iris bed.

It's hard to see what's possible when what's in front of us so very clearly sends a different message. And it's hard to see what's possible when there are many steps, work, even mountains, standing between what is and what could be. Yet, when we are captivated by something: a pond, a relationship, a first home, a college degree or a project - remarkable things can happen.

Paul's letter to the Colossians calls on the church to reclaim and live into the power of their baptisms. By this he means not only that they have been saved by Christ – but that they have been raised with Christ to live the resurrected life – a new life in Christ. Last week we celebrated the sacrament of baptism and were reminded of our own baptisms by doing so. The liturgy we used described dying and rising again with Christ: dying to the old life; resurrected into life with the living Christ. In the early church, those who came to be baptized removed their clothes before baptism, and then received new clothes after they were baptized. In this way they liturgically took off what was old, and put on what was new. They had put themselves confidently into God's hands.

The powerful words of our baptisms are more than liturgical exercises; they direct us to live out of what we say when we gather around the font: that we no longer order our days by the things that deny Christ in us. Rather, we set our sights high, living out the life

that Christ has given us. We live as resurrected people.

Taken seriously, this calls us to radical living, hard choices and controversial stands, at times. The Christ centered life is one that is lived for others; not for ourselves primarily. It requires us to look deeper at what we do and say and measure it against what we are called to be. It demands that we see ourselves in resurrected form, even as we struggle with the realities of our failures.

This can be a challenge. We all know how terrible it feels when we realize we've done wrong: intentionally or unintentionally. Perhaps our anger got the best of us, and we said things we regret, hurting the person who heard them. Maybe we didn't speak up when we should have because it put us at odds with somebody else. Or perhaps it was a decision made without thinking about anybody but ourselves.

The embarrassment of our failure and the shame of regret weigh heavy on us. Seeing our 'Christlikeness' in the midst of those uncomfortable feelings comes with cost: the cost of honesty, repentance and renewed commitment. It requires that the confession we pray together each week jump out of our liturgy and into our hearts. When we pray: forgive us for what we have and haven't done, we do so with discomfort – yet confident that through Christ we are made new.

Putting to death the things Paul calls us to set aside isn't an event. Over and over again we will struggle with things that can pull us away from who we are as baptized and resurrected people. We will repeatedly find ourselves coming face to face with choices that are seductive and carry the power to convince us of the very things that lead us away from our identity. The more power we give those voices in our lives, the more obscure the vision becomes of the life we are called to lead.

Think back to the pond in our backyard and the obstacles Patrick encountered. Several times over he had to contend with the failure of one approach or another. Along with that came my encouragement that he abandon the project altogether. Patrick kept the vision, however. He didn't abandon it when he experienced failure the first, second or third time; he didn't let my discouraging words keep him from bringing the vision into reality. *And*, it's a vision he continues to nurture, tending to the pond, cleaning it, feeding the fish, keeping the water healthy. It's not a perfect process; hot weather, dry seasons and busy days can sometimes leave the pond looking a bit 'neglected.' Yet such times give way to renewed energy and attention.

Paul's words to the Colossian Church exhort them to new life – life lived in a way that is faithful. But he also commends them to a life lived for others. His list of what 'not to do' commends an attitude toward life that keeps the good of the larger community in the midst of our living. We are reminded that we are connected; what I do and consume, my needs and desires, my goals and longings– have an effect on somebody else. I may not always know who, but I can be certain that in nearly every act of every day, I am affecting somebody else.

Almost two years ago a group of MPC members committed to fasting one weekend each month. During that weekend we would read about different parts of the world and the challenges these areas faced with respect to food: how food was grown, distributed and reached or didn't reach those who needed it. After our weekend of fasting we met

together early Sunday morning, shared breakfast and communion and talked about the materials we'd read and the experience of fasting together. There are a variety of theories on the roots of hunger in our world and at least as many different theories on how to address it. Around the table we shared thoughts and concerns; we agreed at times and disagreed at times about what we had read and what we have heard in different places.

However, we did agree on one thing: the issue of hunger is one of many ways in which our connectedness becomes clear. The fact that we would sit together on a February morning and share a fruit salad that had fresh strawberries, blueberries and grapes made us aware that somewhere, in a warmer part of the world men and women were harvesting this fruit. We were eating something that tasted good and was good for us. But we had to wonder:

Were these men and women paid fairly?

Were they living in a place where they could choose to harvest fruit or was this the only option?

Was the soil used to grow the fruit for our tables taking away from family farms and gardens that could provide food for the tables of the workers?

The simple act of eating that meal together prompted us to think about the challenges facing people in other places.

Paul's words calling us away from a life that focuses on ourselves becomes ever more complicated in our global community. Even those things which ostensibly are good choices, on closer examination have layers of meaning that challenge us to look deeper at our actions and attitudes and consider what a resurrected existence demands of us. Paul invites us to envision ourselves in such a way that our actions, decisions and convictions have an effect on others reflecting what we believe to be right and good. We are called to be a living proclamation to what God has done in Jesus Christ.

This vision isn't easy to hold onto or realize when what we see as we look around right now is far from complete. But the fact remains: the resurrection is a present reality as well as an historical event and future promise. God has made us alive with Christ and so we live with this as our story while we go about the business of working, playing, worshipping and serving throughout our lives.

Let us pray,

*O God, grant that we would see ourselves
and the world through your eyes.*

*Plant a vision in our hearts that leads our words and actions and then
make us bold to walk in your ways all of our days. Amen.*