

Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17

HELD TOGETHER BY LOVE

In his sermon, "The Longing For Home," Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner shares an important event in his life, which eventually led him to seminary and into the ministry. It was 1953; Buechner was a twenty-seven-year-old bachelor living in New York City and trying to write a novel. Next door to where he lived was a church and the senior minister was the renowned Dr. George Buttrick. Buechner began to visit the church because of Buttrick's preaching; his "passion was in his oddly ragged eloquence and in the way he could take words you had heard all your life and make you hear them and the holiness in them as though for the first time.... It was toward the middle of December, I think, that he said something in a sermon that has always stayed with me. He said that on the previous Sunday, as he was leaving the church to go back to the apartment where he lived, he happened to overhear somebody out on the steps asking somebody else, "Are you going home for Christmas?" and I can almost see Buttrick with his glasses glittering in the lectern light as he peered out at all those people listening to him in that large, dim sanctuary and asked it again – "Are you going home for Christmas?" – and asked it in some sort of way that brought tears to my eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move on to his answer to that question, which was home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel." And then, Buechner adds this comment: "Home is where Christ is was what Buttrick said that winter morning." (*Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, pp. 233-234)

"Home is where Christ is!" That statement really speaks to me because it is so true; and, it is so very appropriate for us to hear on this Coming Home Weekend at the First Presbyterian Church of Martinsville, Virginia. We have gathered here with one another because, for most of us, either now or sometime in the past, we have called this place "our church home." And, this home is precisely where Christ is!

Throughout the past one-hundred-and fifty-four years, over four thousand members (plus friends and pastors) have been joined together from one generation to another within this church. People have joined First Presbyterian Church for numerous reasons: some grew up in this church with their parents and grandparents; others were Presbyterians, who moved to the area (especially to King's Grant); some wanted to belong to a church in their neighborhood; some joined because their friends were here; perhaps they came because of the fine music programs for children, youth, and adults; or they liked the mission emphasis of the church; some may have joined because there were good social or business contacts within this fellowship; others may have been attracted by the physical beauty of both the "uptown" sanctuary or this present one. The point is that people came to this church from many different places and for many reasons.

And, whether they (or we) realized it or not, all of the saints, who "hang their hats" at First Presbyterian Church and call this their "church home," came because Christ Jesus brought all of us here, together! Despite the various and numerous reasons we ended up at this church, Christ initiated the call and the claim on our lives. And, one way or another, we entered into this fellowship of God's people by affirming or reaffirming our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We have been brought together, and we are held together, by Christ's love – nothing more and nothing less! It is by God's grace that we have been joined together in this particular Christian fellowship.

Home is where Christ is, and this church home is where Christ has placed us and where Christ Jesus continues to hold us together by his love. We may be tempted to lose sight of that sacred fact or think it was due to our choice alone that brought us here in the first place. And, if we do that, if we ignore or minimize the holy reality that we are held together by Christ, then, we can easily become just one more organization, club, agency or institution that is trying to do some good and make a difference in the community. We will be tempted to go through the motions of being and acting like a church, but we will fall short if the heart and mind, the Real Presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is missing from

our midst.

On the other hand, when Christ Jesus is indeed the Head of the Church – of the one body of Christ in general, and this congregation in particular – then his Presence is known and felt by all. We are not called to this fellowship in order to remain strangers or even acquaintances to one another. We are far more than neighbors or friends or colleagues to each other. In this church home, where Christ is - and where we are brought and held together by his love – we are joined together by grace and are called to be “God’s family together,” sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ.

We are not a perfect fellowship of believers, to be sure! When you take individual sinners (like me!) and bring all of us together in a five-hundred-plus-member church, you don’t end up with a perfect church – far from it! And yet, when those same 500+ sinners-yet-saints are brought together and held together by Christ’s love, then it makes all of the difference in the world. When we set our minds on where Christ is, both seated at the right hand of God and right here where two or three are gathered in his name, then we are talking about the real fabric of Christian community!

Here we gather, week after week, year after year, seeking to follow Christ and living the Christian life with one another as best we can. Sometimes, we fall short; we allow what comes naturally to us to get in the way of the spiritual life. At times, we need to be reminded concerning Whose church this really is and Who called us together and Who holds us together by his love.

When we remember that one basic fact, it is much easier to live together. When we reclaim the knowledge that each one of us and all of us are “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,” then we will be better equipped to live the Christ-like life to which we are called. When Christ is at home, not only in his church but also within each of his disciples, then and only then can we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. When we are held together by his love, although there may be differences of opinions and even disagreements, there also exists the reality that, because we have been forgiven, we can forgive each other. And when we do forgive each other, Christ is more and more evident. After all, remember from last week when Jacob was finally reconciled to his brother Esau after twenty long years, he was able to say, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” As we forgive one another, people will see Christ in our actions. They will know that Christ Jesus lives here! The Apostle Paul exhorts Christians in every age to “strip off” whatever is earthly, i.e., every part of our lives, our thoughts, and actions, which are against God and cause dissent with others. Instead, we are to “clothe” ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Also, we are told to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. We are not only in Christ; so also, Christ is in us. Christ Jesus makes himself at home in us. When Christ’s love and peace are found within us, then we are truly a church. It is his love and peace that enable us to worship together, to study and share different perspectives, to have fellowship and laugh together, and to serve others.

During the Senior High Youth conference at Montreat last month, one of the crowd’s favorite songs, which invariably brought everyone to their feet singing loudly, was a peppy tune with simple words yet a profound message. It went like this: “The Jesus in me loves the Jesus in you, the Jesus in me loves the Jesus in you, it’s so easy, it’s so easy, it’s so easy, it’s so easy to love.” That is the song we are called to sing and the truth we are to live by.

We are the church where Christ has made his home. To that end, we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. With gratitude in our hearts, we are intended to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. By God’s grace, this church has been able to sing to the glory of God for these past one-hundred-and-fifty-four years and will continue to do so long into the future. We are held together by Christ’s love, and we go forward to serve and to share Christ’s love with others. God’s faithfulness in Christ Jesus is what we are really celebrating this weekend and every time we gather in Christ’s name. I hope when we look at each other, we will look closely and see the Christ within. Henri Nouwen wrote about a former student of his who came back for a visit. They talked for a while about the past year, their work, and common friends. Then, they lapsed into a long silence. Nouwen said, “The silence which grew between us was warm, gentle, vibrant... while the silence grew deeper around us we became more and

more aware of a presence embracing us. Then he said, 'It is good to be here' and I said, 'Yes, it is good to be together again,' and we were silent again for a long period. And as a deep peace filled the empty space between us he said hesitantly, 'When I look at you it is as if I am in the presence of Christ.' I could only say, 'It is the Christ in you, who recognizes the Christ in me.' 'Yes,' he said, 'He indeed is in our midst,' and then he spoke the words which entered into my soul as the most healing words I had heard in many years, 'From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground.' And when he left I knew that he had revealed to me what community really means." (Reaching Out, pp. 30-31)

While our experiences and encounters with each other may never be quite that mystical in nature, I do hope that – by the grace, Presence, and power of the Holy Spirit - "the Christ in you recognizes the Christ in me," and that "the Jesus in me loves the Jesus in you!" And, whenever two or three or more of us are gathered in Christ's name (whether in worship, Sunday School, fellowship, or even a committee meeting!), I too hope the ground between us will be holy ground.

Then, whatever we think, say, or do, we will be able to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him. Held together by Christ's love, let us love and show his compassion to each other and to those we are called to serve – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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