



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 5, 2015

“Christ In All Things” (Worthy Series) - Ephesians 4:11-24

The Rev. Steve Peich

How many of you have heard the adage: “Growing old is mandatory. Growing up is optional.” Want to see some great folks living into this adage (*photo of very elderly women playing hopscotch*). I love these ladies. May their tribe increase.

There’s something wonderful about older folks keeping young at heart. I can relate to them because I find myself often doing similar things. The other day we had a men’s group meeting in the Jr. High room. I walked in and saw the biggest beanbag chairs I have ever seen in my life. What do you think was my first thought as a full-grown 54-year-old man? It was, “Where’s the highest point in this room from which I can jump into those bags?” (which I promptly did!)

That adage up there may be great for playing hopscotch at 90 years of age, but it doesn’t work too well when it comes to the way of the soul. The soul is meant to be on an ever-increasing trajectory toward maturity—not because if we don’t move to maturity we’re in big trouble with God, but because that’s where the richest, most exuberant life lies. The fully alive life is found in soulfully deep maturity.

Today we continue in our study of Ephesians and our discussion on

what it means to live a life worthy of our calling. That is, how should we live in a manner that increasingly reflects God’s intended purposes for our lives? And as we shall see, central to that call is having Christ in all things.

Last week Pastor Tim spoke about how God has gifted and appointed some folks to evangelize, preach, teach, guide, and provide prophetic guidance to the community of Christians so that, as the church, we live into the new community, the new humanity, that God is creating. A community with a deep unity in and knowledge of Jesus and prepared for works of service, in order to bring about life altering ends in this world.

That may sound like a little over-blown, but I promise this is no exaggeration. Paul really is laying out for us the *purpose* of our lives; laying out for us what a human ought to be like.

I know in today’s culture putting a definitive purpose to our human journey is extremely unpopular. When I studied for a degree in grad school, I would read again and again in my textbooks how there are no absolutes out there. There is no grand purpose to life; no meta-narrative that need guide us. Meaning is what you make. Purpose

is what you create. That kind of thinking sells a lot of books, but in this letter Paul puts all such notions to rest.

If we put Ephesians 3:13 and 3:24 together, Paul lays it out in clear terms: You exist to “*become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ... and to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*”

Let that wash over you for a second. Breathe that in for a moment. If you came here today wondering what the purpose of your life was; the purpose of your marriage or your parenting; the purpose of your place at work and your place in society...there it is. Let’s try to break down the central aspects of this so we can thoroughly understand it.

When Paul speaks of “the fullness of Christ” he is using a word here that emphasizes completeness, a total quantity of something. In other words, it is something that penetrates and permeates every aspect of our being.

Now I highlight that because what is in the texts we will be studying can lead one to think that Paul is telling us how to be more moral or simply how to behave better.

But the new person in these verses is not someone who simply lives by a better moral code, but one who has an entirely new nature.

This is especially clear in Ephesians 4:23-24, where Paul exhorts us to, *“Be made new in the spirit of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God....”*

First of all “made new” is a verb form that indicates present and ongoing action. In other words, this is the present and ongoing work of God in our lives. It’s the journey you are on even as you eat lunch, work in your cubicle, or drive in traffic. So, if you ever wonder what God is up to in you, this is a constant part of it.

Secondly, the word “new” means to cause something to become qualitatively different. Again this is not only about how to improve your morals or outward behavior, but becoming completely new in the spirit of your mind.

The idea of “the spirit of your mind” does not simply pertain to changing the way you think, but this unique phrase of Paul is used to designate the deepest parts of who you are—how you perceive and respond to reality. It’s those deep core beliefs and values that you possess about yourself, about people, about God, and about life.

This is where Paul, as in many occasions, shows his psychological genius. In modern psychology, many theorists believe that we carry around this thing called “core beliefs”. These core beliefs create a paradigm, a set of glasses, through which we review and experience life. Beneath that superficial self, the proper self, even beneath the religious self, there is the true self—the place of our core beliefs

that really guide our thoughts, emotions, and actions.

From this deep subconscious place arises something that psychologists call “automatic thoughts” or “automatic perceptions” about what is happening around us or to us. These jump to the fore, without any conscious effort, take over, and become a driving force behind our thoughts, feelings, our actions, and our words.

So if my core beliefs or perceptions are unhealthy or toxic, then all kinds of hurt and pain and sin gets lived out or spilled onto other people. For example, if I have a core belief about myself that says, “I’m not good enough” (that is, if I see myself as defective, deficient, inadequate, deeply flawed, and rejectable, etc.), and that core belief encounters someone who is correcting me about something, then all kinds of things can go wrong. I will hear their correction and automatically perceive it and feel it as a put down. I will feel that this person is trying to make me feel small, or is pointing out how rejectable I am.

Because of my core belief in the spirit of my mind I will interpret correction as insult, as disrespect. And these inaccurate and unfiltered assessments, evaluations and feelings can then cause me to react with a behavior that is unChrist-like. For example, I may react and lash out with toxic anger or defensiveness such as, “Are you trying to say I’m not good enough?” Or, “You know, I’m never good enough for you! You are so hard to please!”

Have you ever heard people react like that? Have you ever said it yourself?

So it is there, in that core place, in the spirit of our minds, in that place of automatic thoughts and perceptions, that I think Paul is saying we need to experience the complete change of Jesus Christ.

Some of us have known God for years. We have been to a hundred Bible studies, a hundred classes, and a hundred conferences, but we still struggle with *reacting* to life—with lashing out or with shutting down, with deep insecurities, with people-pleasing, or with wearing masks that hide our insecurities and pain.

We have belief, we have passion, we have commitment...but our automatic *reactions* to life remain the same almost as if we are still young teenagers inside.

In a little while, I will share what is necessary to begin change, deep change, but for now I just want you to reflect on the question, “Are there things in my life that need deep change? Things that my friends, my wife, my kids, my co-workers have been trying to tell me for years, but I just don’t want to own them?”

The first step of change is *always* through the truth, through the reality of our lives. So what is God touching on right now in you that may need some change?

Now not only does Paul emphasize Deep Change, but also Broad Change. Look at Ephesians 4.15. Here Paul states, *“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”*

Don’t miss that. We are to grow up, to live into the fullness of Christ in *all* things.

Not just in some things, or most things, or in just spiritual things; but in all things. The way I visualize this is being centered on Christ; permeated with His values, purposes, passions, and character.

Let me explain this a bit. Very often when we learn about being a Christian, people express it as putting God first above all things. Now this is absolutely true. But for me, it is also incomplete. Incomplete because the great *Christian* question is not simply, “Is God a *priority* over everything in your life?” But, “Is His life *permeating* every aspect of your life?”

If there is one thing I have seen over the past 30 years of ministry is that God over everything doesn’t necessarily equal God *in* everything. How many of us have seen: Great Bible preachers, who demean their spouses or kids? Successful and generous Christian business people, who have a bad temper or a big ego? Great prayer warriors, around whom everyone has to walk on eggshells? Talented Sunday school teachers, who cannot handle conflict well? You get the idea.

Let me illustrate this a little further. When we make our hierarchies, what do we usually say is the “right order” of things? Typically we say, “God first, then comes family, friends, work, fun, money, the NY Yankees, etc. I’m totally kidding. It’s more like this: the NY Yankees are second.

What if instead of a ladder we thought in terms of a Circle and Centricity—God is at the center of all things, with His passions, purposes, and values *permeating* each area, so that, God is honored by *everything* we do (in or out of church).

Let me put it this way. If I asked a Christian, “Is God more important than your family?” That’s easy, that’s a yes. But if I asked, “Are His values, purposes, passions, and character *in* your relationships *with* your family; in the way we speak with and listen to and argue with each other?” That’s a much tougher question. One in which the right answer requires deeper change.

Or if I asked, “Is God more important than your money?” That’s an easy, yes! But if I ask, “Are God’s goals, values, purposes, passions, and character *in* the making and spending of that money?” That’s a much tougher question—one in which the right answer requires deeper change.

Brothers and sisters, I can come to church or small group and shout hallelujah until my throat is sore, but if the values, purposes, passions, and character of Jesus are not *permeating* the way I speak to my spouse, how I listen to my kids, or treat my co-workers—or even waitresses—then I’m missing the point of being a Christian.

Let me tell a quick story. Many years ago, I was a Christian about a year, and my friends were excited to meet up with this older man so we could be discipled by him; (viz. learn how to become more mature as a Christian). So we had an initial meeting at a restaurant.

At first he was full of smiles and good spiritual talk and good theology. But when the waitress came with his order, which apparently wasn’t exactly what he ordered, he reacted to her with anger and spoke to her in such a demeaning manner it started to make me very uncomfortable. I knew

from that moment right there that this man would not help me grow in *all* things, but only in ‘spiritual’ things, so I never went back.

My point is, if our faith is only good for church or small groups and all things churchy, then it is a faith never imagined by the scriptures; because the Christian faith of scripture is about transforming every aspect of reality.

If our faith doesn’t come down into our marriages, child rearing, accounting, and bill paying; if it doesn’t come down into the way we work, the way we conduct business, the way we think about justice or social issues or economic issues; the way we date or the way we treat waitresses—then it is a faith never imagined by the scriptures. I know this sounds pretty heavy, but I think this is exactly what Paul is getting at in this letter. You will really see this in the weeks ahead.

Let me make another significant point, along the same vein, as we talk about Paul’s Pathway—of what it takes to live into this new self in Christ.

Now as we read before, Paul in verses 23–24, talks about putting off our “former way of life” and putting on our new self in Christ.

²² *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to **put off** your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to **put on** the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

It is very important that he includes a both/and for how we need to live into this new kind of life.

Over the years I have heard a lot of sermons and lessons and talk about “putting off” all kinds of stuff. This intersection seems to reflect what a lot of us, and especially non-Christians, hear from well meaning Christians. Or what Christian teens hear from well meaning parents...a lot of “don’ts”.

But the thing we have to know is the absence of sin does not necessarily mean there is the presence of the life God intended. The absence of sin does not mean that maturity and Christ-likeness is necessarily present.

As we say in alcohol recovery, when we only live by “don’t” we can end up with “Dry Drunks.” Yes, the person has stopped drinking, but there remains deep within—in the spirit of their minds—all the anger, hurt, and pain that drove them to drink in the first place. With a Dry Drunk there is only behavioral modification, but no deep transformation. This is why we need to equally emphasize the “Put On” piece.

For me, Christian maturity, is not simply about “Don’t...lie, cheat, or lust.” But it’s about becoming the kind of person in your nature and character that doesn’t need to, because the life and character of Jesus permeates your life.

For example, the reason I do not cuss at people is not simply because God’s rules say we shouldn’t, but because I simply don’t need to...because I’m learning how to look at and value people with the heart of God.

Or, for example, Christian maturity is not simply, “Don’t lust because it’s against the rules.” But

become the kind of man in your character that doesn’t need to... because you value women the way Jesus does; you value sex and marriage the way Jesus does.

For me, and this may sound heretical for a moment, but please consider this: The kingdom of God is not simply about following rules, but it’s having the godly character to *live without* them. That is, to live in such a way that makes rules and laws superfluous because our lives are so deeply infused with the values, purposes, passions, and character of Jesus.

As I often teach people: *Rules Exist because Character Doesn’t*. For example, I do not hold the hand of another woman besides my wife. Why? There is no biblical law saying I can’t. There is no civil law saying I can’t. So why do I refrain from doing it? Well, one reason is because I want to live long! But the real reason is because I value my wife, I value her feelings, her heart and would not want to crush it for anything.

As Randall Balmer, a professor of American religious history at Barnard College has said, “I have no interest in making abortion illegal; I would like to make it unthinkable.” Do you catch what he is saying?

When my kids were younger and the use of the Internet was growing, I would talk to my kids about listening to certain types of rap music or looking at pornography. In my discipleship of them I would try not to use the “don’t do it because its evil” approach, which would have been correct—but it is incomplete. Instead, I would try to teach them God’s value of women and how pornography or some of rap music denigrates women.

In other words, I was not simply trying to make rap or porn “illegal” in our home, I was trying to make it unthinkable because I wanted God’s value of people to be the driving force beneath my kid’s behavior.

Let’s be honest, when it comes to parenting it’s far easier to lay down rules than it is to forge character. But character will always create a stronger child and a powerful adult.

So along with the Putting Off and Putting On, how do we get there? Well, let me just break it to you: there are no shortcuts. I know we live in an age of speed, but when thinking of what it takes to become more like Christ don’t think microwave. Think imu—a slow cook. And you have to think about making an effort to get there. Because the reality is this: Maturity is NOT automatic or inevitable—it’s intentional. We simply cannot become the people God intended without real, intentional efforts on *our* parts to end up there.

By “effort” I mean, in part, involving ourselves in spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting, silence and solitude, deep study of the Bible or of theology, serving others, taking risks to serve God, etc. But what I also mean by effort is really facing and replacing all those things in your life that are not like Jesus.

As I alluded to before some of the toughest work of putting off and putting on includes dealing with the absolute truth of our lives—taking a long loving look at the reality of our soul’s condition and being strenuously honest about our relationships, our attitude, and our behavior (more on this next week).

Bottom line, we cannot grow unless we grow through the truth.

As Christian writer, Esther DeWaal succinctly puts it, "Maturity comes only by confronting what has to be confronted within ourselves." What may need "confronting" in your life today?

And may I add, as Christian professor and psychologist David Augsburger likes to say, "Selective honesty is not honesty at all."

A while back I heard someone say in the context of unanswered prayer, "Pray a prayer that Jesus will always answer. Lord, what do you want me to change?"

So get real and get busy and get the input you need; be it from mentors, pastors, therapists, classes, family, friends, etc. By the way, if you are not sure what to change—just ask your spouse.

Finally this. Remember in verse 16 Paul said, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." That last phrase is key: "As each part does its work".

One thing that comes across clear in scripture is that church life is never a spectator's sport. I notice in our Christian verbiage there is a lot of talk about "attending." We attend a church, we attend services, we attend a class, or a Bible study, or a men's dinner, etc. But I cannot find where the New Testament speaks about a Christian as an "attender" of anything.

In the Bible we are called priests, we are called disciples, servants, etc., but never attenders.

My point is simply this, even if you have never been to seminary or have a college degree, you have a place, "a part", in helping me and this community live into all the big goals I have laid out today. You have a part in being a co-contributor to the discipleship of this church, including discipling me.

I can't tell you how much my soul has gotten bigger from spending time with folks like Alan Stockton, a former UH professor. His insights and his quotes of great thinkers that he shares with me stretch my soul to greater things. He truly helps me transform the spirit of my mind. I could go down a list.

My point is, when you come to services such as this, or to a small group, or to a Life Training Class, come to be a fellow priest ready to pro-actively provide whatever God has given you in your gifts, talents, knowledge, experiences, etc. to help others rise up and become like Jesus. So long as the Spirit of Christ is in you, you have something to share that will stretch the souls of others to greater things or bring God's healing into the life of another.

Maybe it is one wise insight shared in a Life Training class. Maybe it's just a really good question asked in a Bible study. Maybe it's a word of prayer or buying someone lunch after church. Maybe it's just a listening ear. Never underestimate the power of being a good listener. I cannot overstate how much it helps a person experience the fullness of Christ when people feel they are truly heard.

Listen to how one writer puts it: "To listen to another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service

that any human being ever performs for another." – Doug Steere

If you still feel like you can't even provide that, then at least become what some folks call a Soul Friend. What do I mean by soul friend? Writer and psychologist, David Benner describes a "soul friendship" this way: "Soul friendship is the gift of a place where anything can be said without fear or criticism or ridicule. It is a place where masks and pretensions can be set aside. It is a place where it is safe to share deepest secrets, darkest fears, most acute sources of shame, most disturbing questions or anxieties. It is a place of grace—a place where others are accepted as they are for the sake of who they may become (in Christ)."

Who would like to have a friend like that? Who would like to have a small group like that? What could happen when an entire church can be like that for one another? Do you think we would stand a better chance of "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ... and to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" if this characterized us? Imagine the impact we would have for Christ.

But please remember, we cannot do what Jesus did unless we become as He is. And when we become as He is, we will indeed live into a life worthy of our calling to which Jesus calls us. Let's pray.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com