

“Character Development”
Psalm 130; Colossians 3:1-14
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
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Set your minds 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. Colossians 3:2

Our recent August heat wave has reminded me of a cold weather cartoon the *New Yorker* ran a few years ago. It features Santa Claus and three of Santa’s reindeer. The reindeer are standing before Santa’s desk in his office at the North Pole. One of the reindeer is holding a piece of paper that has written on the top “List of Complaints”. In the caption, Santa is saying to the reindeer, “Complaints, you’ve got complaints? Let me suggest you keep just one word in mind, ‘Venison’”!

The word I want you to keep in mind today is the word “character”. I want us to think together about Christian character. Christianity has always been about both belief and behavior. “The demand of Christian ethics is that we act upon what we know”. (1) As Jesus himself put it, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord Lord,’ will inherit the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

In his book *The Christian Life*, pastor Michael Lindvall tells the story of a young man who was a member of his church’s high school confirmation class. Because he was the only member of that class who had not been baptized as a baby, the pastor asked him to visit with her in her office. She began by explaining the theology of baptism and how things would go on Sunday morning. When she finished, the young man said, “I’m going out to the lake with a couple of friends

this afternoon. Why can't I just get baptized out there today?" The pastor, being a good Presbyterian, reached over to her shelf, and took down a volume on Presbyterian polity in order to explain to him why baptism takes place in our tradition in the sanctuary on Sunday, rather than at the lake on Saturday. As she was looking for her place in the book, she said, "And besides, if you get baptized out at the lake, how will the people at the church even know that you've been baptized?"

Without missing a beat, the boy answered, "By the way I act, of course." (2)

Christianity has always been about belief and behavior. Our baptism is our initiation into a whole new set of possibilities, which include how we may actually live our lives. (When I think about baptism and the drought that southern states and western states are experiencing this summer, I thought you might be interested in how it has affected the way different churches are going about observing the baptism. It seems the Baptists are using a wet sponge rather than full submersion. The Methodists are wiping with a damp cloth, and the Presbyterians have taken to issuing rain checks!) The Apostle Paul wanted the small community of newly minted Christians in the city of Colossae to understand their baptism and the inherent interconnectedness between identity and action, faith and character. "If you have been raised in Christ," he wrote, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated on the right hand of God for [in your baptism], you have died, and your life has been hidden in Christ with God." When exactly did they die? When they went under the water and were raised up to a whole new set of possibilities. In Christ all who have been baptized have died to "the elemental spirits of the universe" and belong in the new reality. (Colossians 2:20)

Our lives have already been changed, lifted up by resurrection power. Paul uses a brilliant metaphor when he writes, “Our lives are hidden with Christ in God.” The Greek word also means “buried”. Rather than being buried in the earth, we are now buried, hidden, in the very heart of God, where wisdom, truth and strength reside.

Often, in the Assurance of Pardon, we hear Paul’s great words from his Second Letter to the Corinthians, “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the past is finished and gone. Behold the new has come.” (II Corinthians 5:17) Hardly ever does it happen in a flash. Throughout our lives, we grow into the new self that we have been given. Our character development takes place as we become more and more confident that we belong to that other set of values that are operative in the universe – the ones that are antithetical to greed and human debasement, to the darker powers. It is to the values and virtues of the kingdom of God that we are now accountable.

The great news of the Christian faith is that while on our own power, we couldn’t pull any of this new life off, Christ makes just about anything possible. Reprobates can become saints; old habits can lose their power. Relationships marked by mistrust and meanness can be redeemed. Betrayals of ourselves and other people can be crucified, dead, and buried through the grace of God. This is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Morningside friend recently sent me an email of children’s prayers. They were absolutely delightful. One little girl who was learning to say the Lord’s Prayer said, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from e-mail,” which is understandable these days. I especially liked this prayer offered up by a 5-year

old and overheard by his dad, “Lord, if you can’t make me a better boy, don’t worry about it. I’m really having a great time just as I am.”

But mostly, people who are in the grip of things that separate them from other people, from God and from the good they know are not having a very good time. Certainly, our world is not having a very good time either these days.

In his important book *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, social critic Christopher Lasch considered the world from the perspective of a heavenly parent: *To see the world from the point of view of a heavenly parent is to see the world in the most terrible light possible. The perspective unmistakably reveals the unwholesomeness...of our obsession with sex, violence, and the pornography of making it in this world, whatever the cost; our addictive dependence on drugs and entertainment and instant news...our preference for non-binding commitments, our third rate morality, our refusal to draw a distinction between right and wrong, lest we offend others who say we are trying to impose our morality; our indifference to the needs of future generations, an overgrown arsenal of destruction, a deteriorating environment...* (3)

From the perspective of a heavenly parent, things don’t look so good. I am convinced that people of faith have a leadership responsibility as never before. We “must learn how to go to our Scriptures, to our faith traditions as bearers and representatives of the moral dilemmas of our time. How does the Gospel help those, who in our time and place, are thirsting for righteousness?” (4) How can we know and help others to know the good?

Let us look for a moment at Paul's Letter to the Colossians to see what we can see about personal ethics and about the good, remembering of course that it's never enough to acknowledge only our individual sinfulness, but always the brokenness of the world. (5) No one and certainly not the Apostle Paul would ever say it was an easy process to become the person we are declared to be at the time of our baptism, or when the announcement of the forgiveness of sin is made. Paul uses very strong language to get across the difficulty of shedding the old ways – "Put to death" – "Kill off" – "Get rid of those things" – this is serious business, he wants his readers to know, and it takes serious attention and serious strength. Paul's hit list includes a series of sexual excesses. Interestingly though, the sexual excess list concludes with the vice of greed. What a crucial connection to hold onto today. The common thread that runs through the sexual sins and the sin of greed is the concept of excess. There is nothing wrong with having things. The problem comes when you can never get enough things. Then, you have become an idol worshipper. On a societal level, so dangerously, the insatiable thirst for fossil fuel has put the whole world at risk. The problem with wanting and needing is when we simply cannot get enough. This is true of sexual appetite. Sexual desire is one of God's greatest and most delightful gifts, but when that desire becomes your god, and its out-of-control state causes you to break the covenants you have made, causes you to betray the best that you know, then you have gone back and picked up that "old self", that through Christ's power, you could have left behind.

On account of our not knowing our limits, Paul writes, "On account of all this, the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient." I don't know why Paul has to be so grim; he's not the kind of person I would like to sit next to at a dinner party, to tell you the truth. But there is a way to read those words, "On account of this, the wrath of God is coming into the world." In a way that is strangely

comforting. Think about it this way: Since you and I cannot defeat the temptations that besiege us on our own, (in fact, we can justify giving in to them almost on any day of the week), we can take heart that God is possessed of a steadfast hatred of sin. That hatred is nothing less than the manifestation of God's unfailing love for us, God's desire to help us be unbroken in ourselves and reconciled to one another.

Paul goes on to name another set of vices – what you might call the vices of the mouth – anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, lying. “Among all the creatures of the earth, human beings alone have the power to use words.” (6) We can use them for good, or we can use them for evil. In the new life made possible by Christ, there is not room for sins of speech. There wasn't room 2,000 years ago. There is not room today. I am glad we are moving as a culture away from that phrase that was so popular in the 80's and 90's when we were all encouraged to give vent to every single feeling that we ever had. Ventilating one's anger on a regular basis is usually not a very constructive thing to do. Anger can be good if it is channeled in ways that take on injustices and that change the way things go in terms of oppression, but misused, allowed to get out of control, anger is perhaps the most destructive force in the universe. It can rip apart families, it can destroy friendships and marriages, it can send nations into downward spirals which lead to war, which leads to unspeakable suffering and death.

Be careful with your anger. Once bitter and cruel words are spoken, they can never, ever be retrieved. Remember that self-respect is more important than blowing off. Remember that bearing with another is a crucial Christian virtue, even though it doesn't fit very well and even though you don't feel like doing it. If

you practice forbearance, maybe some day you will become a person for whom forbearance is the most natural thing in the world.

Let me say just a word about meekness, kindness, and that whole cluster of virtues that Paul refers to, virtues usually assigned to women, and from which men are ordinarily excused. Please note that Paul makes no such distinction. Men as well as women are challenged to clothe themselves in kindness and compassion. Men as well as women are called to a higher standard of sexual morality. There is no double standard in the New Testament. The great news is that living on a higher moral plane really is possible through the redeeming grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Two final points: The first is that love is the virtue that holds together all the rest. Love is so fecund that everything good is born from it. Not long ago I visited a farm. As I walked through the orchard, I saw a peach tree that was bowed down with its abundance of peaches, its graceful limbs groaning with golden red fruit. That's love: more fruit to harvest than you can possibly imagine. Let love be at the heart of your life and your relationships, and everything good will follow from that.

And finally, this simple point about vices and virtues: Clusters of both can be found in every human heart. A person with a bad temper can also be a kind person. A person who is envious every time he hears of a friend having something good happen to him, can also be the very same person who cares for his elderly parents with patience and tenderness. The worst thing you can do to yourself is to saddle yourself with the idea that you must be a bad character, because there are things about you that you are not proud of. Remember, Christ was the only truly good character. For you he lived; for you he died; for you he rose from the dead;

for you he prepared a new life, which one day, will fit you like a glove. Until that day comes, seek the things that are above day by day. You will never be sorry if you seek the things that are above.

(1) Krister Stendahl

(2) Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life*, Geneva Press, 2001, p.86.

(3) N.Y. and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991, pp. 33-34.

(4) Douglas John Hall, *An Awkward Church*.

(5) Marva Dawn and Eugene Petersen, *The Unnecessary Pastor*, William B. Eerdmans, 2000, p. 83.

(6) Ralph Martin, *Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians,, and Philemon*, John Knox Press, 1991, p. 125.