

BINDING EVERYTHING TOGETHER

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October 24, 2021

Text: Colossians 3:12–16

I am grateful to Hope Esparolini for her submission of Colossians 3:12–16 for our “Command to Preach” series. Hope wrote me the other day just to give me a sense the role this text has played in her life: “I have Colossians 12–16 marked in my Bible with three different dates, though I have read it many more times over the years, even this year . . . It certainly is a commandment on how to live: to live with kindness and compassion; to offer forgiveness to others; and to be thankful for my life as it unfolds: a tall order most of the time, in all honesty. Yet even if not fully reached, each commandment, each word has pointed me in the right direction over and over again.”

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A few years ago, the media theorist Douglas Rushkoff published a book, *Present Shock*, describing something called “narrative collapse.” His thesis was that familiar and reassuring narratives have been overwhelmed by information overload. Because of too much information, the onslaught of globalism, and instantaneous networking through social media, we have a hard time telling the story of who we are and what values we share. For example, we were once all bound together around a shared narrative of American Exceptionalism, in which we were assured that individualism, hard work, frugality, capitalism, and economic striving would make us all successful. We understood the story of America and where we fit in it. It had a logic that made sense to us. But stagnant wages, increasing poverty, a lower standard of living, and unresponsive leaders and institutions have left many unsure and unconvinced about the American Dream. People are now wrestling and reckoning with questions that reveal that the story has been lost: How and where do we locate ourselves? How does the world really work? And does what we have held up as true and good about the American experiment hold up?

Ironically, that same scholar held up Christianity as an exception to narrative collapse. The Christian story, through biblical narratives, is considered one of the last, most consistent narratives holding up. It is the one narrative that consistently binds its hearers and adherents together by giving them a sense of history, purpose, and destiny. Now, that is a hopeful and flattering but perhaps incomplete and outdated conclusion to draw about Christianity, especially given the overwhelming evidence of the church’s increasing institutional unpopularity, growing biblical illiteracy, and declining church attendance. No, Christianity is not immune to the dangers of narrative collapse, and we need only read the Letter to the Colossians to see that people of faith have had to address the people’s concerns and doubts about the faith and how things really hang together. Church leaders have had to take seriously people’s desire to know how the world really works. In particular, the writer of this letter to the Colossians had to reinforce the story of the Christian faith when the narrative was on the verge of collapse.

Scholars are near certain that the writer of this letter is not the Apostle Paul but do suspect that the writer was taught by Paul and steeped in Pauline thought and theology. For our purposes, we identify the writer as Paul. The Pauline student who wrote this letter has created what can be arguably described as one of the earliest Christian apologetics in defense of the faith. In the cosmopolitan city of Colossae, with its

pluralistic cultural and religious traditions and practices mixing and mingling, there was a wrestling and reckoning with Cosmology—the nature of things; how does the world work; how does it all hang together; what is the philosophical foundation for our existence; what is internal logic of God-talk and spiritual matters. The letter to the church in Colossae is Paul’s argument in the debate about competing cosmologies. On one end, in the Hellenistic world, theories and doctrines about the natural order of the universe were informed by nature, philosophy, and astrology. On the other side, in the Jesus Movement, the natural order of the universe is created, infused, and ordered by God, acting through Jesus Christ. Caught in the middle were members of the church in Colossae, who are hedging their bets and asking themselves, given all the other theories and narratives on offer, “Do we gamble our lives on Christian love or not?”¹

As you may guess, Paul is emphatic about which side he’s on, declaring immediately after his introduction that Christ is “the firstborn of all creation, in whom all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers” (Col. 1:15). Paul writes that the fullness of God dwells within Christ, and through him, through his ministry, through his witness, all of humanity has been reconciled to God. So, the people are united in love with God, knowing God’s forgiveness and God’s mystery. They do not need to wonder where and how to locate themselves in the world. There is no need to get hung up on the philosophical or theological foundation of their existence. There is no need to lose confidence in what the project and practice of faith mean. There should be no anxiety about their place in the world. There should be no doubt about God’s love for humanity. There should be no fear that the presence of God is hidden or inaccessible. Their identity is clear and their place secure. They are God’s chosen people, holy and beloved.

Their identity means something. God’s chosen, holy, and beloved people not only have a story; they are the story. They bear the narrative in their presence and appearance. If there is question about their lives and destiny, if there is question about God’s intention for humanity, the answer is found in how the Colossians, how we, live it out. Paul uses the word *clothe*, a metaphorical putting on of the presence, protection, and appearance of virtues that let the world know who and whose they are. We put on, we wear the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We bear with one another. We forgive one another. In the middle of our complaints against each other, whether over theology, over finances, over what we hang on our wall, we bear with one another, we forgive each other, we love each other. When we disagree about anything, we bear and forgive each other.

We let the peace of Christ rule our hearts to which we are called into one body, not individuals or lone believers. We teach and admonish, anchored in the story of God’s love and peace. We sing about what God has done and is doing in our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. But more than all that, and the one thing that will make our virtues and practices automatic, consistent, and even easy is love. If indeed it feels as if the church is suffering from narrative collapse, that it has lost its connection to the story of salvation, liberation, and the reign of God, there is a highest virtue that can bind us together, the animating virtue around which we can come together and stay together: Love. When we start wondering if we have lost the story, if there is any doubt about how this whole thing hangs together, the apostle exhorts the readers to put on love. Only love binds everything together in perfect harmony. If the narrative is lost, we know that we have failed to love. There is no collapse in this story as long as love is the highest and supreme virtue for the people of God.

The late great William Sloan Coffin said it best, “Love is our business; if we can’t love, we’re out of business.” Love is our story; if we can’t love, we’ve lost our story. The through-line from God’s definitive entrance into time and history up to this present moment of life and existence; the connective and

¹Lewis R. Donelson, *Colossians, Ephesians 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 8.

animating force emanating from the heart of God is love. And no matter what other theories or theologies find expression in the religious marketplace, no matter how important the philosophical questions may be, no matter what new questions arise and new narratives compete for our attention and adherence, love is the story of our faith. Love is our story. Unfortunately, for many in the world, the church has not reliably loved nor forgiven nor shown compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Some people unfortunately can't find the plot of our story we are telling. Gamble on love. Coffin's mantra is "Make love your aim."

This nation may be suffering from a narrative collapse. Our political ideologies may be competing for narrative primacy. The stories our culture tells may not make sense to us anymore. But if the church is to recover its story and, thus, its mission and identity, then it must put on love. If the reign of God means anything, if God's connection to us as God's chosen, holy, and beloved really does describe who and whose we are, if beloved community is a real state of our gathered existence because of the binding power of love, then the world cannot shake us from our foundation. Clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, we become the vanguard of an advancing movement of love, binding everything together. May it be so.