

**RE-SET: Family & Friends.**

*Colossians 3:12-4:1 (The Message); Matthew 5:21-24 (TNIV)*

*January 10, 2010 Trinity United Methodist Church*

*Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

As we enter a new year, we are in a series of messages we are calling **RE-SET**. Sometimes, we end up living a life that isn't the life we want...or the life God wants for us.

It's like those times when you are on the computer and things freeze up. Nothing seems to work. So you finally hit "Restart." You start over.

This weekend we are talking about the life we have in our families and with our friends. What would it look like if you went to God and asked Jesus to help you live with your family or your friends in a new way...a better way...a way that works well *and* pleases the heart of God?

*(Will you pray with me?*

*May the words of my mouth, and meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Savior. Amen.)*

You and I both know something: one of the best things about being alive is being a part of a family, or a group, or a network of friends, or a team.

There's a picture on the screens right now of our family. At Christmas. We've put it up not because our family is perfect, but because it is the most recent picture of our family. And we look almost normal (whatever normal is). We're all there. The only missing ones are Michael and Emily. They were over in Crown Point with her family. There's Sharon and me. And our two of our three grown sons, Nathan and Bryan. There is Joleen, one of our daughter-in-laws. She's married to Bryan. You can see Ella and Olivia. We love them a lot. There is Westra. Our son, Nathan, loves her very much -and we hope she'll soon be a daughter-in-law. *(Oh, boy, should I have said that?)* There is Westra's brother, Hanlon, who came out from Boston to join us for Christmas. And there is that pretty, Christmas tree with all the pretty white lights in the background.

Family is so cool.

A lot of the stuff in life that makes my heart sing has to do with what has happened in my life through my family. My Grandpa driving down the road, testing my knowledge about the cars on the road, asking me to identify every model and year, and then cackling with glee when I got them right -and he would lean over and squeeze my knee. Man, that was cool!

The other week I was in the kitchen. The family was at the house. All three boys. I could hear them hanging out in the living room. Messing with each other. Talking trash. Teasing one another. Do you know how good it feels, as a Dad, to hear your grown kids hanging out with one another...enjoying being together...as friends? Now, they have their moments. They drive each other nuts sometimes. But as I stood at the kitchen sink, and listened to the boys buzzing in the living room, I was so joy-filled I nearly wept.

This past week Bryan called the house. He said Joleen had gone to the store and Ella wasn't happy. Sort of grumpy. When Bryan heard Joleen at the back door, he said to Ella,

“Someone is at the back door. You’re going to be so happy. Guess who it is?” And Ella stopped grumbling, broke into a smile and shouted, “GRANDPAAWWWWWWW!!!!”

Family is so cool.

And so are friends.

Friends are so cool. Being a part of a group or team or church is so cool!

The other night four friends I have known for more than thirty years got together for dinner. We met for dinner, with our wives, on a snowy night, at the Barbee Hotel and then drove over to Warsaw to have ice cream at a Steak n’ Shake at 9 o’clock at night. (That’s what passes for wild nightlife with pastors, I want you to know!)

It was a miserable night outside, but there isn’t much better in life than being together with good friends. People who love you enough they don’t back away from you when life gets crazy and weird and sad and overwhelming.

Family and friends are so cool.

You and I know that, right?

You and I know something else.

There is sometimes more pain and brokenness in our families, in the relationships we have with our friends and the people in our church or small group or office or team, than words can describe. Strangers can’t hurt us as badly as the people closest to us...the people who know us best...the people we care about the most.

I’ve told you, in the past, about someone I love very much who has gone through tough times. We used to be close but something happened -about a decade ago- that has fractured our relationship. I’m really not sure what went wrong. I’ve asked. Never gotten a very clear answer.

Whenever I call to ask how she’s doing, or tell her I love her, things start out okay and then the conversation goes downhill. So, in the middle of last year, I started making fewer phone calls and I began sending her a greeting card with a small note. About once every six or eight weeks. Telling her I love her. I thought that might work better than a phone call.

A month ago, while coming back from a meeting in down state, I decided to call her. I do that when I am on the road: I make phone calls. So I called her. Things went okay for about 15 minutes. Then, things went very wrong. I was driving through fog. On a very dark night. Trying to follow a twisting state highway across Whitley County. And the person I called began yelling at me. I tried to slow things down. I told her didn’t want to argue. I told her I had called to tell her I loved her. To check in. She kept yelling. I got defensive. I started yelling back. I started yelling, “I CALLED YOU TO TELL YOU I LOVE YOU! DON’T YOU GET THAT! I CALLED YOU TO TELL YOU I LOVE YOU. YELLING AT ONE ANOTHER ISN’T GOOD FOR US...AND THAT ISN’T WHAT I WANTED TO HAVE HAPPEN.” She kept yelling at me. I hung up on her. She called back ten minutes later and yelled at me for hanging up. I hung up, again.

Friday morning I sent her another card.

Maybe you shouldn’t know that. Maybe you don’t want a pastor who has such broken places in his life. But I figure we need to be honest with one another. Sometimes I just get it wrong. The words I use are wrong. I -more often than I want to admit- make a mess of things.

Families and friendships can be broken in all sorts of ways.  
You and I know that, right?

Now, there is one more thing we know: no matter how hard we try to isolate ourselves, to protect ourselves from being hurt by our family or friends, we are always connected *because community and relationships are at the very heart of the universe*. We'll always be in relationships with other people. We'll always be a part of family -even if we run to the other side of the world and cut off all contact with our siblings or parents or kids.

We were made to live in relationships -in community- with others.

Even God needs -and lives in- community. The Bible shows us that God is Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even God is wired to live in community. Even God wants to do life with others. So the Father, Son and Holy Spirit hang out together. They're a small group! Genesis 1:26, in the TNIV, quotes God as saying, "Let *us* make human beings in *our* image."

Do you remember the story of creation in Genesis? God makes man in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, and then in verse 18 says "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Rob Bell, the pastor at Mars Hill Church up in Grand Rapids, points out the fundamental building blocks of the universe are leptons and quarks. They are "elementary particles." Scientists assume that leptons can exist independently by themselves, but they can only be observed in twos and threes. They hang out together. In community. Independent leptons -in twos and threes- join with one another and become one.

Bell observes that at the heart of the universe, at its core, is some sort of relationship - some kind of sub-atomic community- of energy. The three leptons become one. They become something together they cannot be alone.

At the heart of God, at the heart of the universe, and at the heart of who we are as human beings, is the need to be in a relationship. In a community.

William Barclay, the Bible scholar, wrote in his commentary on Colossians, "Christianity is community."

That's why so much of what Jesus has to say is about how we live with one another. *To be a Christian is to live with others in a Jesus way of living and loving.*

So what does God have to say to us in the words of Paul in Colossians 3? Especially about those places where things need to change...where we're going through the motions... where we are stuck in a self-destructive ways of dealing with one another?

*So, chosen by God for this new life of love... (:12)*

Notice that word "new."

It's God's way of telling you there needs to be change.

If things in a relationship are stuck, if we can't get beyond a broken place, we need to think or act or speak in new ways. To keep doing life in our family or marriage or friendships the way we always have will mean that nothing will change. Do what you've always done and you'll get what you've always gotten.

I know it is scary to step away from the old patterns -even when they're not working. I used to ride to and from work with a couple who lived in my hometown. They worked in separate buildings a couple blocks apart in downtown South Bend. They were good people. They paid their taxes and kept their yard neat and showed up in church to worship God on Sunday mornings.

But they were stuck. I got to see -and hear- how stuck they were every morning and every afternoon as we drove the thirty mile trip back to our small town. He would joke and she would shake her head with quiet disgust. Her posture and the tone of her voice said, "You are a sad, pathetic little man and I am so tired of you."

Then, after a long period of silence, she might suggest something the family could do... and he would always have reasons why her idea was silly. Impractical. Disappointed, feeling put in her place, she would listen to another joke, stare at him with eyes that seemed lifeless and bitter, and then look out the passenger's side window.

It was a kind of theatre. An act. That they repeated day after day after day. There didn't seem to be a particle of joy or tenderness in their relationship. But they had perfected the pattern. They had their "act" down pat.

Paul is telling us that if we are going to let God bring life to a relationship or to our family or to our small group, we'll have to take the risk of trying a new way.

The last thing worth noting, about the use of the word "new," is that Paul assumes things can -with the help of God- change.

You may doubt that, today.

One of the most extraordinary things about Jesus, one Bible scholar has said, is that Jesus assumed things could change. Jesus believed people could change.

That assumption lies behind what he says to the woman caught in adultery: "I'm not going to condemn you but go and sin no more." (John 8.)

That assumption is behind what he says when he shows up in Jericho and invites himself to the home of a short, greedy little tax collector whose whole life has been all about taking. Jesus goes to the home of Zacchaeus believing the man can change.

That assumption is behind his comments to Simon the Pharisee who turns up his nose at the sinful woman who shows up in his home, uninvited, and anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and costly ointment. Jesus teaches Simon the Pharisee about the power of forgiveness and the beauty of grace, about a God who welcomes broken people, and in teaching hard-hearted Simon all of this Jesus assumes that Simon can change.

Simon can begin to learn the power of forgiveness and the beauty of grace. Maybe, next time, Simon will open the door of his house not just to people who appear to have it all together but to broken people who have been put back together by God's love in Jesus.

Jesus is so confident about the power of the Father's love that Jesus believes people can change. Jesus calls people to change. And here Paul is talking with the Jesus followers at Colossae about them living a new life.

Look at the end of verse 12: *So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.*

There is question inside for us this verse, and the only person who can answer this question is you: Will you let God dress you? Or are you going to insist in dressing yourself? Will you use your own wisdom, your own hunches about what works and is right, to guide how you speak, how you listen, how you work through conflict, how you handle the times when you are hurt, or will you trust God's way in Jesus? Will you let God dress you?

I find, the more mature I get the less confidence I have in how to dress. It's gotten a lot more complicated, honestly, than it was in the days when you simply ironed a white shirt, hung a tie around your neck and put on a suit coat. Most days if I wore a suit people would wonder what I was up to. If I wore a suit and tie it would frighten some folks away from Jesus, I hunch. There are some days, though, when a suit and tie and dress shirt are the right choice. But most days it is a pair of slacks and a sweater or a sports shirt. Many days it is a pair of blue jeans.

I'm not sure I've got it right so I give it my best shot. I put on a sweater I think looks good, and I put on a pair of jeans I think I can be seen in, and then I go to Sharon and say, "This is okay, isn't it?" Often, she'll say, "Sure. That's okay." Sometimes, though, I can read her eyes and I know something is wrong. She'll say something like, "That sweater just doesn't go with those slacks." Or she'll say, "You know darker jeans are in. Those look pretty faded."

I've asked her if what I am wearing is okay, and do you know what I do when she tells me things don't work...that I need to change? Do you know what I do? *I grumble and mutter something like "I thought it looked just fine."*

So who is doing the dressing?

Will you let God dress you? Put you in the kinds of attitudes, the ways of thinking, that God knows will work best? Or will you do it yourself?

It's important for us, I believe, to talk about three of the words mentioned in this verse. The first word is "compassion."

One of the threats to our relationships is hard-heartedness. Our hearts get hard towards the people we know best. If we've been married for a long time, we have too many opportunities to see just how weak and flawed this person can be. We begin to resent just how...just how...how...human the person we live with is. Frankly, we've had our fill of it. And our heart begins to turn to stone. We stop looking at our spouse with tenderness. Instead we look at them with irritation. Counting up what they don't get right.

The same thing can happen as children. We see how weak and silly our parents are. We have to help them figure out the DVR. We have to help them load software on their computer at home. Our dad has this hair growing out of his ears, or he has this ridiculous way of snorting when he laughs at re-runs of "Everybody Loves Raymond."

And mom has this way of driving the car that drives us crazy. Accelerates up to the speed limit and then lifts her foot off the accelerator. Speeds up and slows down. Speeds up and slows down.

We wonder why God has given us -someone so bright, so full of promise- such run-of-the-mill people as parents. Such pedestrian losers.

Our hearts are hard towards one another. We've lost our softness.

I remember, a couple years ago, having a conversation with someone who was really pounding me. Doing their best to knock me down a peg...or two...or three. They'd sort of

“zing” me. Or “pound” me. And then go on as if nothing had happened. It was like they thought I was made of stone. That I didn’t feel.

So one day we talked. They began to point out the stuff that needed attention. The things I hadn’t gotten right. When they took a breath, I said something like this, “I think sometimes you assume I have the misguided notion I have all the answers. I think sometimes you think I am cruising along without any doubt or uncertainty. Supremely confident of what we are doing and what I am doing. But I don’t think you know how scared I get sometimes. Or how I wake up in the middle of the night wondering if we’re doing it right. Or how lonely this can be. Or how very tired I get. I wish you could see the scared, uncertain me. I wish you could see the me who sometimes leads even though he feels too weak to lead. I wish you could see that...instead of the always strong, always confident public me...and I wish there was some softness in your heart towards me.”

Make sure compassion is a part of your wardrobe, Paul says.

The second word worth noticing, in this verse, is the word “kindness.”

It’s a word, one Bible scholar observes, that means caring about what is happening in another person’s heart and life as much as you care about your own stuff.

I have a friend whose adult son is a tattoo artist. Not only is he a tattoo artist, but his body is a work of art. Arms and neck and shoulders covered with tattoos. He has wide, black plugs inserted in his earlobes.

When he traveled with his parents to the extended family’s Christmas gathering, he walked in the door and his aunt took one look at him and said this to her own adult son, who was standing nearby: “Don’t you ever come home and walk through our door looking like that, or I’ll throw you out.”

That was the first thing my friend’s young adult son heard when he walked through the front door for his family Christmas.

Put on “kindness,” God says. Care as much about the feelings and heart and life of the person sitting next to you in the car, or across the table at a family gathering, or working with you at youth group on a mission trip, as you care about your own feelings and life and heart.

One of the best days of 2009 was the day I spent on the Big Thompson River in Colorado fly-fishing. I caught a couple of beautiful trout that day. There was one particular fish we had been going after for most of the afternoon. He was hiding under and around a rock shelf, just beneath the surface of the water, on the east side of the river. So when I pulled him in I was pretty excited.

The guide netted the fish. Before we let him go, the guide asked if I wanted to hold the fish. I reached down to take the fish but the guide pulled back. “Rinse your hands off in the river first,” he said. I was puzzled. He explained, “You have natural oils on your hands that aren’t good for the fish. So we want your hands to have been in the river before you touch this trout.”

He wanted me to handle the fish carefully...tenderly...so we wouldn’t do any damage before releasing him back into the Big Thompson.

Kindness.

I believe that means that we'll handle one another carefully. Do as little damage as we possibly can. Deal with them in a way that is good for them...life sustaining and life nurturing for them.

The third word is the word "humility." That means, in the New Testament, seeing yourself clearly. Having an honest and reasonable sense of your strengths. And also seeing how weak and flawed you still are. Not undervaluing who you are...what you bring to the table. And not having an inflated sense of your gifts and value and place.

We very good at picking out the flaws and weaknesses and shortcomings of other folks. And we have a tough time catching a glimpse of our own shortcomings.

When the sheer, cussed humanness of other people drives you crazy, when you can't stand it any longer being surrounded by such immature, incomplete creatures, it is a good thing to remember you're one of them. You're one of us.

When you realize you have your own issues, you have your own blind spots, you have your own unique ways of puzzling and frustrating other people, then you may be more understanding of others...more patient with others.

If you wonder whether you have reached perfection just ask us. Just ask us...and we'll let you know.

Look at verse 13: *Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you.*

Jesus had a lot to say about forgiveness.

Peter -one of Jesus' disciples and a close friend- comes to Jesus and asks how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. (Matthew 18.) Traditional Jewish practice of the day said seven times.

Jesus answered, "Not seven times but seventy-seven times."

Which means, "Keep forgiving. Stop keeping a set of books, recording each wrong, so you'll know when to stop forgiving. Just keep forgiving."

Which sounds, at first glance, like Jesus is saying sin doesn't matter. Like anything goes. Like we aren't to hold people accountable.

He's not saying any of that. Jesus is simply saying that when we hold things in our heart against another human being, when we hold onto wounds and slights and resentments, we are never well. This junk, like emotional trash, builds up in our life.

When we don't forgive the people who have disappointed us or hurt us, when we let ourselves get "stuck" back there where the hurt happened, we hurt ourselves. It's like a nice, two-car garage that gradually -over time- begins to fill up with golf bags and old bicycles and stacks of old magazines and empty plastic containers until one car has to be left out in the snow and the ice and the wind. We say we are going to clean it out but we never do. Until, one day, we can't get either car in the garage. It is full of junk.

That's what happens to us when we don't let God perform the miracle of forgiveness in us towards those who have disappointed us or wounded us or betrayed us or sinned against God. We hold onto that stuff, we refuse to move ahead with life until things are put right, and the hurt and resentment and bitterness and desire for justice takes up all the space.

Forgive seventy-seven times, Jesus says in Matthew 18 (TNIV).

He talks a lot about forgiveness.

Jesus talks a lot about forgiveness and he shows us how that is the only way that life works. Forgiveness is the one essential ingredient if a relationship is to endure...is to last.

More marriages and family relationships and friendships than we would want to admit are stuck because of past wounds. Disappointments. Betrayal. The only way to move forward, the only way to hit the RE-SET button, is to pray that God will set us free to forgive. So we can move forward.

God has two more important words for us, in this passage, if our relationships are to be well and alive.

Look at verse :14 (The Message): *And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it."*

What is Paul saying?

Two things.

First, he is telling us life begins, really begins, when we put on -accept for ourselves- the love the Father has for us. The Christian writer Brennan Manning is right to point us towards 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:18. That verse says perfect love casts out fear. To know we are totally loved by God in Jesus is to be set free from paralyzing fear about our value...our worth.

Our relationships don't have a chance, we can't love the way God wants us to love, until we let ourselves be loved by Jesus.

Here is what I suspect: many of the problems we have living with one another, many of the problems we have in our relationships, are somehow linked to our failure to understand how God loves us.

To put on love is to know, to accept, to lean back into, the love God has for us.

To put on love is to put on God's love for you. Love that, if you look Jesus straight in the face, you can't miss.

And to put on love is to love the people in your life with a Jesus kind of love.

There is a cook up at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago named Bettye Tucker. According to an article that appeared in the September 20, 2009 *Chicago Tribune*. Bettye happens to be a Christian.

Bettye works the night shift. She has been working there for 43 years -28 of them on the night shift. The reporter says Bettye sees a steady stream of parents come through her dining room at night. Many of the parents are frightened and exhausted.

People call the cook Miss Bettye.

When the reporter was visiting the hospital, Miss Bettye served food to the mother of a three year old who had fallen out of a second story window that morning. She fed another mother whose seventeen year old daughter was fighting a rare kind of leukemia. A third mother had just waited through her eighteen year old son's seven hour brain surgery.

The stories the parents tell break the heart of Miss Bettye. A coworker explained "that's why she feeds every last one of them as if they had walked right into the too small kitchen of the south side bungalow where Miss Bettye lives."

A member of the Children's Hospital housekeeping staff says this about Miss Bettye:  
"You need someone to bring you life, and she brings it in the middle of the night."

When Miss Bettye asks families, "How you doing?" and they say it's not a good day she says, "Don't lose hope." When the night shift nurses tell her it's a bad night, she says, "I understand it's a bad night. But guess what? I am here for you. I'm going to get you through the night."

There was a picture in the newspaper that showed Miss Bettye with her head bowed in prayer over a table. "I'm a praying woman," she told the reporter. "I pray every night for every room and every floor and every person in the hospital. I start with the basement and I go up, floor by floor, room by room. I pray for the children, I pray for the families, I pray for the nurses and the doctors...I say, every night when I am driving on the expressway, 'Oh, Lord, I don't know what I'll face tonight, but I pray you'll guide me through.'"

The reporter, Barbara Mahany, says this about the cook who works in the middle of the night: "Just might be that divine helping on the side is the most essential item on Miss Bettye's menu. The one she stirs in every broth, and in every whisper. The ingredient that makes her the perpetual light shining in the all-night kitchen."

Put on love. Dress up in the Father's love. Let it cover you.

And love the people in your life -even the tough customers, the ones closest to you that drive you half out of your mind- with a Jesus kind of love.

When you do that, though, it will be easy to stop loving. It will be tempting to go back to the old ways. So (Colossians 3:15) "*let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other.*"

Because, in this world, we'll get out of tune.

In this world, you'll get out of tune.

So you'll have to keep asking Christ to keep you in tune with one another.

That's why Paul tells us to sing songs to one another. When the people around us are about to give up, when the people around us are so weary they are about to take off the new clothes, when the people around us are so overwhelmed there are about to go back to the old ways of pounding and shaming and judging and hurting and doing whatever they feel like doing, we are to sing songs to one another.

Paul tells us to sing our hearts out to God, and to sing songs to encourage one another.

When Olivia is very, very upset, her mother bends over her and whispers, "Shoosh, shoosh, shoosh, shoosh." Olivia understands. Olivia gets it. The fear seems to go away. The upset seems to go away. When she hears that voice.

Some of us will be just holding on, and so it is important when we come together that we sing for God...and for one another...and to one another.

Put on love.

Put it on.

Put on the whole wardrobe: compassion, kindness, humility, discipline, forgiveness.

Don't forget love, though.

Never forget the love.