Set Your Minds On Things Above
Aug. 1, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-11

More than a year ago, I opened a Facebook account. I was seeking a particular piece of information. I found what I was looking for and didn't go back. So, until last week, my Facebook "profile" consisted only of my name.

Still, part of me knew that I needed to go ahead and dive head first into this new form of community. Our intern, Danny Trapp, showed me his account as an example of a full-fledged Facebook presence, proving there is a place in online social networking for middle-aged guys with thinning hair and expanded waist lines. Then, when I was 'friended' by one of you, who has thirty years on me, I knew it was time. Last week, I built my profile with pictures, quotes and all and suddenly things started to happen. I feel as though I've opened Pandora's box.

"Welcome to Facebook," one of you wrote on my 'wall.' "At times, it can be fun. It can also be like crack."

"Glad you are on Facebook," another one of you wrote. "It's a little like being a voyeur."

I've decided both of those people are right. It's like a voyeur … on crack.

I quickly found out that I'd been 'friended' by 55 people who had been waiting for this last year for me to accept their request to be friends on-line. I thanked them for their patience. In the last few days, I've received comments on people's status – some of whom I don't even know - and comments on those comments and comments on those comments on those comments.

I've watched how some of you greet the Facebook world each morning with inspiring quotes. Some share funny videos and photos, others share things they like – from bands to local businesses. One person baked 3,200 extra servings of Pistachio Biscotti and shared some with me. That's virtual Pistachio Biscotti, of course. I didn't quite know what to do with that.

I also caught up with some church members I hadn't seen in a while. I acted on your prayer requests, shared your joys and concerns and I discovered that the Caldwell community is alive and well in cyberspace. Many of you keep up with each other through the routines of your lives, the ups and downs of your days and nights. For all of these things I am grateful.

Facebook is a phenomenon not to be taken lightly. Five hundred million people are 'on' it, the equivalent of the third-largest nation on the planet. It is an economic and political

force, spreading Western news and information, culture and capitalism around the world. Pakistan, China, Iran, Syria and Vietnam have all blocked their citizens' access to it, the desperate moves of nations fighting a rear-guard battle against globalization.

At the end of the day, though, Facebook is only a tool, a means to an end. It reflects the deep desire we all have to be in community, to be in contact with people with whom we share values, ideals, interests and aspirations.

And our God is there, too. I am comforted that most of the people who have "friended" me are people I know through this church family. That is a community I am blessed to have here on Sunday mornings – and now 24/7 online.

If the Apostle Paul had had Facebook, who knows how much faster the church might have grown. Instead, he did his own form of social networking in the decades after Christ. He traveled long distances over difficult terrain. He moved from community to community, house church to house church. But Paul and other church leaders he inspired did exchange letters, otherwise known as epistles. In a sense, then, all we have to do is open the Bible to the back half of the New Testament to read what Paul might have shared on his Facebook 'wall' or in his 'profile.'

As with the creators of Facebook in our day, Paul and his followers were interested in what defined community in their day – in particular, what it means to be a community "in Christ."

As I wrote in my blog last week, we may hear – and even use -- that phrase as we interact. It reminds us of the power of those little things called prepositions. It's one thing to find friends and share likes and dislikes "on"-line. It's quite another to stop and think about what it means to be "in Christ."

Jesus traveled across Galilee, teaching and preaching, healing some and upsetting others, attracting suspicion and finally death threats. He changed the course of the world. He was the one and only God-man, fully human, fully divine. How can we and our meager, little lives claim to be "in Christ?" It seems like such an abstract idea, something that sounds nice when we read and hear it in scripture, but is, otherwise, distant, out of the reach maybe even boastful, beyond the pale.

Writing to some of the first followers of Christ, the author of Colossians offers poetic language:

> So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 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 3:1-3

Beautiful, even lyrical language, language that almost by itself sets our minds on things above. Almost. But then the things that are right in front of us get in the way. Things like

finding a job … or worrying about our friend who needs a job. Things like that nagging health problem that you need to get checked out. Things like paying for college or retirement or both, or, maybe just this week's groceries.

Sure, Christ is seated at the right hand of God, we may quietly think to ourselves, but I'm down here on earth. Christ may come again one day. In the meantime, I need to figure out how I am going to get the car repaired.

Today's passage of Colossians goes on, as we heard. It admonishes us "to put to death" those things that separate us from God, those earthly things that we call sin, sins of the flesh, sins of the mind, sins of the heart: impurity, passion, evil desire and greed … anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language. None of us can claim we have lived a life without those sins. Each of us must confess those sins and ask for our God's forgiveness.

But then the letter gets lyrical again. "… you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." (Colossians3:9-10)

"We have?" we might say. "When did we do that? Sure, I try. But I don't much feel like a 'new self.' I don't feel very 'renewed.' "

We may understand the idea, the claim that Christ's death and resurrection accomplished these things for us. But, again, it's hard to be in touch with that renewal amid our busy, trying, often tedious lives.

* * *

One commentator suggests that we should consider these verses like a New Year's resolution[1], a moment to lift our heads from the day-to-day and live as people who have resurrection hope. I would add that these instructions are not to the individual. Colossians does not speak of me and you or yours and mine. It uses language of us and ours, language of community.

Here at Caldwell, we are called together and sent into the world. We strive to be a community "in Christ." Still, it's easy to get caught up in our to-do lists. Our aspiration to be a missional church calls us to be outwardly focused, to seek and serve Christ by serving others. You have responded with the commitment to mission and justice of a church twice our size.

At the same time, we care for each other as a church family. That means calling to check on absent members, finding ushers for memorial services and someone to cook a casserole for an ailing brother or sister. Then there is keeping up with the buildings and grounds, finding time for fellowship and more.
Just last week, one of you commented to me that this church doesn't have a summer slow-down. I have to admit that I forgot who said that. But it was someone I was

[1] Katherine M. Bush in Feasting on the Word, p. 305, Year C, Volume 3

chatting with before a committee meeting on Monday. Or maybe it was the meeting on Tuesday. Or Wednesday. Or Thursday. You get the point.

Colossians reminds us that there is far more to being a community "in Christ" than committee meetings. Yes, organization, meetings and individual leadership are necessary to being the arms and legs ***of*** Christ.

But to be "in Christ" is to set our minds on something higher and to do so together, to be a community that is unlike any other in our lives, on-line or off. The power of being a community "in Christ" is unique, irreplaceable, set apart. It is where we experience, think and feel things that we find nowhere else. It is in the company of others seeking to be "in Christ" that we are drawn in deeper, closer to our God, where we are reminded who we are and whose we are. That is what the author of Colossians was getting at.

To set out minds on things above is in no way to say we as a community are above it all, disengaged and aloof. That is not the Christian life. To the contrary, we are hip-deep in this world, its trials and its triumphs. Setting our minds on things above is how we get by down here below. But it is more than just getting by. It is to have a hope that comes only from Christ. In his earthly community, that hope is fed and nurtured.

To live in Christ is also to live between the already and the not yet. Already, Christ has come. Already, Christ has given us new life. Already, Christ has ushered in the beginning of God's kingdom. We can live in that truth. We can hold it up to our mouths and nose like an oxygen mask and breathe deeply when we need it.

But there is also the not yet. We recognize that God's kingdom has yet to come in full. The day of Christ's return, the day of a new heaven and a new earth, has not arrived, no, not yet. So, in the meantime, we live in between, as a community called to keep our minds on things above with the confidence that the promise will be kept.

"Well," some of you may be thinking, "that still sounds pretty abstract. And, by the way, I am still trying to figure out how to get my car fixed."

You are not alone. The author of Colossians agrees, saying in today's verses that the life "in Christ" is "hidden." While we may see glimpses of it on earth, its fullness awaits us, which is why those clues and glimpses of things above are so important.

Stephen Doughty[2], whose words I shared on my blog last week, had more to say about those clues and glimpses. Community in Christ begins, he writes, with a hunger, an awareness, an openness to something new that is able to draw our attention.

Then, as we respond to that hunger, we should be neither too casual nor too forced. Community in Christ is best when it is simple. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," Christ said, after all.

[2] Discovering Community: A Meditation on Community in Christ, Stephen Doughty

Community in Christ is to follow those natural inclinations we have, to write a note to someone who is down, to send a card or make a phone call. It is, very often, simply to be present with another.

Community in Christ can also be glimpsed in prayer, individual prayer, yes, but even more when a community prays together, as we do here on Sunday mornings. We experience community in Christ when we speak truth to each other and when we encourage each other. We glimpse it when we are stretched for God's purposes and when we take risk to do the right thing for the kingdom of our Creator. We are a community in Christ when we celebrate communion, as we do today, a feast of hope we can find nowhere else.

Sometimes, community in Christ takes shape in ways we don't anticipate. Last week, many of our Caldwell 4x4 groups held their first meeting. One member of the group tells his or her story. For one person, it may be a strictly factual account. For another, it may be an opening of the soul. Three others listen deeply with the promise not to judge or interrupt. That, too, is to be community in Christ, to honor another person's journey and to find, by listening to it, that we all face the same joys and challenges, hopes and fears, regardless of our skin color, our socio-economic class or our sexual orientation.

In all of these ways and others, friends, we are setting our minds on things above. And before we know it, if we really pay attention, we recognize the renewal that Colossians speaks of, a renewal that forms us as one community, where there is, as Colossians says, "no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free." But only "Christ, who is all and in all."

What more could we possibly need or want? Amen.