

*A Future With Hope:
6. Call me a Loser?*

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

Text:
Psalm 85
Colossians 3:1-11

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Hope United Methodist Church
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA
Phone: 610-446-3351
Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org
Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net
Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

Colossians 3:1-11
(from *The Message*)

So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. **2** Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ - that's where the action is. See things from his perspective. **3** Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life - even though invisible to spectators - is with Christ in God. He is your life. **4** When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too - the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ. **5** And that means killing off everything connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That's a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God. **6** It's because of this kind of thing that God is about to explode in anger. **7** It wasn't long ago that you were doing all that stuff and not knowing any better. **8** But you know better now, so make sure it's all gone for good: bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk. **9** Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. **10** Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. **11** Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.



Christmas Eve when I was about 13 or 14 we were on our way home from midnight candlelight worship service — my mom, my dad, and me – it was close to 1 am, it had snowed while we were at church so there was a nice covering of white on the ground, and

there were no streetlights on that stretch of I95 N through Lower Bucks County. It was dark except for our headlights reflecting off the new-fallen snow — maybe a few other cars were traveling along with us in the first moments of that Christmas morning.

My dad noticed a car pulled onto the shoulder of the road, he pulled onto the shoulder, and slowly crept up behind the car. A man was stooped in the dark, changing a flat tire – inside we could see a woman and 2 small children peeking out the rear window.

“Dad, what are you doing? Shouldn’t we get out and help?,” I asked.

He shook his head, “No, it’s fine.” We sat there for a few seconds and I remember feeling really bad and getting anxious that we weren’t getting out to help, I thought the man must be frightened not knowing what we were doing. “Just stay in the car and we’ll let our lights shine on him so he can see what he’s doing.” We sat there, motor running, heater keeping us warm – a few cars zipped by while the snow fell around us all.

The man finished fixing his flat, threw the jack in the trunk, waved a gracious and appreciative “Merry Christmas” to us, and hopped into the driver’s seat of his car. We waited until they pulled away, and then we followed on up that dark and snowy interstate on our way into another Christmas morning.

I’ve told that story as part of my message on several Christmas Eves. The light that shines in the darkness. Yet something has always troubled me about it even as I tell the story. I want to hold out my dad’s simple act of kindness as an example of following the Jesus message – an example of “being Christian” – but somehow it feels to me like a pretty sappy story.

It’s just a random act of kindness, isn’t it? It’s just doing what I was raised to know was the right thing to do – just helping out a stranger in need. It’s not earth-shaking, it’s not life-changing, it’s

not justice-making, it's not moralistic, it's not confrontational. Letting our headlights shine so a man can see to change a flat tire is not like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, visiting the prisoner – it's not like *real* Jesus stuff is it? It's not raising the dead or exorcising demons, or healing the sick.

But just recently I realized why that story has stayed with me for 40 years now. I was studying this Colossians scripture with my colleagues a few weeks ago and we were talking about this list of what sounds like a checklist of behaviors we need to avoid if we're going to be "good Christians" – "bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk" reads Eugene Peterson's *The Message* – "fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed," reads the New Revised Standard translation. It can seem like Paul, or pseudo-Paul (this was probably written but a "student" of Paul), is teaching that being a Jesus follower is quite simply about behaving nicely – you must get rid of "sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy."

"Now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth."

So, to be a "good Christian" means never swearing when that guy cuts you off while driving down Township Line Road? Being a follower of Jesus means not getting angry when your kid breaks your favorite coffee mug just because he was careless? Being a good Christian is only about being polite and clean and smiling in the midst of a scary world?

My New Testament scholar friend, Hal Taussig, reminded us that we need to read this passage in its context. The Roman Empire in which the early Jesus movement was growing was a pleasure-seeking society. Prostitution was legal, public, and widespread. "Pornographic" paintings were featured among the art collections in respectable upperclass households. It was considered natural and unremarkable for adult males to be sexually attracted to teen-

aged youths of both sexes. Roman religion supported sexuality as an aspect of prosperity for the state, and individuals would sometimes turn to private religious practice or "magic" for improving their erotic lives or reproductive health. To do what you wanted to without paying much attention to those below your station in life was acceptable – to get all you could at the expense of others was how one could make it big in the world of the Roman Empire. That's not to say that it was anarchy and there were no rules, but to be a Roman citizen gave one privilege and power which could be used selfishly without criticism.

So here comes this new Jesus-religion. Roman citizens mocked this new group who worshipped a political seditiousist who was given the death penalty, a god who could die on a criminal's cross. And now these Jesus-followers were advocating celibacy as a way of life in a world where producing progeny meant wealth and success and prosperity – celibacy eliminates progeny and is therefore counter-cultural. These Christ-worshippers were promoting equal gender rights – men and women were meeting together and eating together and working together and worshipping together – in a world where top-down hierarchy ruled, where man is head of the house and a strict order of family life was deemed necessary for survival – these Jesus freaks were messing it all up! These people were combining their wealth and dividing it equally among anyone who was in their little cult so that all had a share in a better life.

These Jesus-followers were "losers" by the standards of society in the Roman Empire – loser with a capital L. They were mocked and criticized and ignored. They were chased and beaten and arrested. They were, in the extreme, killed for their behaviors which set them apart from what it meant to be a successful Roman citizen.

My best friend in high school came from a family that did not attend church. Joe's dad had little time for religion and he considered it a waste of energy. He considered himself an atheist

and would often bait me with the argument that if all you had to do to “be saved” was ask for forgiveness, he would just do what he wanted now and wait until the moment before he was to die before he asked for forgiveness for all he had done wrong.

When trying to get into a line of traffic, Joe’s dad would say, “There’s gotta be a Christian who will let me ahead of him!” Sucker! He would use that line in a negative way – to equate politeness with being a “Christian” and therefore with being a patsy, a fool, a loser.

Maybe that’s my problem with my Christmas Eve story. Is it just too superficial to say that my dad was being a good example of following Jesus just by stopping along the side of the road to let his headlights shine on a broken down car? If stopping by the side of the road to help a stranger is all it takes to be a good Christian, doesn’t that take something away from the depth of the Jesus message? Is it just a glossing over of what it means to be just and fair and caring and loving – what I argue is the basis for Jesus’ teachings?

Would you stop to help? The world and its message of paranoia and fear and threat would call me a loser, but I still would today. By the world’s standards maybe my dad was a loser. Maybe only a sap would risk stopping on a snowy Christmas Eve night to help out. Call me a loser? Okay, I’ll accept that.

But you see, it’s those simple counter-cultural acts that often set us apart from “the world,” if you will. The world passes by on the other side – the world tempts us with a get-all-you-can success motif – the world calls us suckers if we give 10% of our income to an institution that seems outdated and irrelevant – the world tells you that to be sexy you have to sell your body by shaping it and painting it and decorating it – the world tells you that *you* are the most important thing in this life and that if what you’re doing is about someone else – you’re a loser.

And that’s the point of this letter to the Jesus-followers in Colossus. “Keep on keeping on,” the letter says. “Be content with obscurity, like Christ.” That’s pretty counter-cultural isn’t it?

“Be content with obscurity”? How am I possibly going to get ahead in this cut-throat world if I remain obscure? That’s not the Hollywood message, is it?

Tell the world to back off. Be intentionally counter-cultural. Shun the big cars and newest gadgets in favor of living a life that matters – a life that cares about and does something about other people. That’s the Jesus way. It “means killing off everything connected with that way of” – life? – no, “that way of *death*” the letter says. It’s not “life” if you’re doing what the world around you teaches is the way – it’s death. Living the way of Jesus means being counter-cultural – get rid of “sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That’s a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God.”

It would have been very easy to drive on by that broken down car that night. It was after midnight. We were tired. We still had gifts to wrap. We could look the other Way. We could merrily sing along with the radio. We could be afraid of strangers lurking around every corner. But that was not in my dad’s nature — so we didn’t pass by – we stopped. We stopped, I think, because we were guided by that “light that shines in the darkness” that we know as The Christ.

If passing by on the other side is what it takes to be safe and successful in the world, then call me a loser because I’m called to stop and to be present. And if we as a Church are looking to be successful by the world’s misguided standards, then we are in big trouble. Because the Jesus-message, lived out in the world around us, is by its very definition counter-societal and creates losers if each of us.

Hope for the future is more about doing what the world *doesn't* expect than what it does expect of us. And, like Sonja Kerr reminded us a couple of weeks ago, it's often about the little things.

If the world says to be successful we need to be The Church of the Behemoth with 17,000 members. And we have a church with 220 members where I can call people by name as they receive the bread and cup. Then call me a loser.

If the world says to avoid being a loser you should worry only about yourself and we follow someone who says feed the hungry which for us plays out in making Breakfast Bags for elderly shut-ins, the call me a loser. Or if our little church decides that it can help end poverty by filling a food cart once a week and distributing that food to hungry people and that's being a loser – then call me a loser.

If the world says hate your enemies but Jesus says love our enemies and we choose to do so by calling for an end to war and violent conflict, if we try to understand and tolerate those who are different from us – if that makes me a loser, then call me a loser. If standing in front of a gun store that sells illegally makes me a loser, then call me a loser.

If the world says the way to punish for crimes is to lock them up and throw away the key or just put them to death and my understanding of the Jesus message includes signing a petition to end mass incarceration and stop prison privatization. Call me a loser

If the world says avoid those who are different than you and Jesus says welcome the stranger in your midst which leads me to loser actions like wanting to know who my brothers and sisters really are or working to end racism by renouncing my White privilege or by promoting family values by defending the right of same sex couples to marry. Then call me a loser.

We Jesus-followers are losers by the world's standards and to be part of Hope Church is to be identified as being a loser, then so be it. Call me a loser? If doing what we do is counter-cultural, yet is in response to the call of the Gospel, then willingly I let you do so.

And if stopping to let my light shine rather than passing by on the other side makes me a loser ... then me a loser .. and pray that as Hope lives into its future that it will continue to be a loser as well.

Amen