

Calvary United Methodist Church  
February 2, 2020

## **HOLINESS, THE REFLECTION OF CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER**

Rev. Dr. Stephen Gallaher

### **Children's Message:**

I'd like to invite my young friends. If you would, would you go to the front pew, because I don't want you to miss the puppets. So, all of our young friends, feel free to come up and have a seat. We have the Barnyard Bunch Puppets with us today. Do you guys remember them? I brought them with me last time I was here; not the first time, but last time. And I thought it would be pretty cool to bring them back again. This is what they ask: No. 1 that you watch carefully and No. 2 that you listen closely? Are you in? Does that work for you guys? You'll watch closely and listen carefully? Can you say "Yes"? I have grandchildren 4 and 2 at my house today and they just generally don't say "yes." It's more like a "YES!" Okay, here we go.

(Puppet show.)

Alright, alright guys! So, oh, that dog! Just tough. But we hope that that dog opens his heart to the Lord.

Well, we are going to pray. We are going to talk to the Lord...that's what prayer is, is having conversation with God, talking to God, listening to Him. And we are going to bow our heads and close our eyes so we aren't distracted with lights and all the beautiful things here in the sanctuary. So, let's pray, please.

Lord Jesus, thank you very much for all of our young ones in this congregation. We are delighted to be able to share this day with them and one another. Thank you, Lord, for our folks. Thank you for the nice clothes we were and the good food we eat. Thank you for opportunities like this to get to know you. Jesus, it is in your name that we pray. And we kids all agree, saying: How do we always end a prayer? Amen.

Okay, God bless you. You may go back to your seats.

### **Message:**

Acts 2:42-47 and Colossians 3:12-17

First of all, I want to say to Susie, thank you for sharing with leadership in this service today. It's really good to see you again. And Steve and Mark, thank you for your work back there. It took a while to get me all wired up here today. You guys do a fabulous job. Thank you very much. And what can we say about the music ministry. I've often said when I come here the music ministry at Calvary is just fantastic. So, thank you for all you have done and all you continue to do.

Now, before we read this passage from Colossians 3, I need four bold teenagers. Now, I asked for teenagers last time I was here, so you aren't carrying around a seemingly paralyzed man, you aren't doing that. In fact in the second service they dropped him three times. So, I'm looking for four willing teenagers to come and have a seat in that front pew, ok? Be bold, be willing. I'm not going to humiliate you in front of anybody, don't worry about that. Four bold teenagers to assist in this. Parents are giving encouragement to their teenagers. So far...oh, one, two, three, four! We got four. Okay, thank you. Can you have a seat in the first row? Thank you very much. I'm going to need you in just a second. This is all just setting up what I am going to share with you from Colossians 3.

And so for twelve years I served as lead pastor of the Warrior's Mark United Methodist Church, which is relatively in the shadow of Beaver Stadium. But in all the years I served just outside of State College, I had never been to a Penn State football game. Clyde, do you have season tickets? He does. Until my dad secured tickets on the 45 yard line from his boss and it came with one of those wonderful parking passes that allowed you to drive right up against the stadium. I had heard all kinds of things about how people prepare for the big game and they do something called tailgating. And so we packed our little cooler with our bologna and cheese sandwiches and made our way to like the second row from the stadium. We popped open our trunk and we got out our cooler and just glanced around at how seriously people took their tailgating. I mean there was a restaurateur there with his head chef slicing prime rib. And I pulled a bologna and cheese sandwich out of it. This guy caught my eye, saw what I was holding. He walked over to me and said, "Buddy, would you like something from our table?" Sure!

So, festivities before the game were wonderful, but it was time to move on into the stadium. And so we did. We found our seats and they started something in the student section and I'm not going to have us do this, don't worry about it. It's called the wave. I had seen it on TV but I never really experienced it in person. And if you have ever been to the game or watched the games on TV you know what I'm talking about. So, enthusiasm always starts in the student section. It's the teenagers, like who else would you get to do stuff like that? It was the teenagers that got everybody fired up. And then the wave would just make its way all around the stadium, peter out a little bit when it got toward the old section, but then it would pick back up and gain steam and go back to the students. Well, I had never experienced this personally, so I assumed the posture of a casual observer. But the fella in the seat behind me was clearly experienced and when the wave came around to our section, he up out of his chair, it's not just his hands but his whole body, leaning forward and he's hanging over me. And he sits back down and I'm thinking wow, that's impressive. The wave comes around a second time and once again, I'm just observing, that's all. I don't have a bad spirit. I'm just observing. And he this time launches himself out of his seat and lands with his arms over my shoulders, clearly annoyed that I was not participating in this endeavor. And he looks at me, face to face and the man obviously had consumed too many adult beverages prior to the start of the game. He said, "What's the matter, Buddy? Don't you got any spirit?"

I said, "Yes, sir, but it's probably not the kind you are thinking of." He said, "Watch them there cheerleaders." Yep. And I watched how they had an amazing capacity to inspire enthusiasm in you?

And right now, aren't worship services that way sometimes? A section of cheerleaders? Our choir there, our ministry team, they do perform that role, but this wave looked a little different on a given day as, thank you, my young friends, come up here, would you. You are just going to follow my lead. They are hesitant, extremely hesitant, the looks, the non-verbals they are offering me are incredible. I wish you could see them. Now, we need to space you out accordingly, so I need two down here and you need to space yourselves out and you are going to follow my lead, okay. Let's give it a practice shot. So, it's something like this: As the worship facilitators in front of us would say something beloved to the congregation... EVERYBODY, GIVE ME AN "H"! So let's go ahead and try it. Here we go, you follow my lead. EVERYBODY... (Quiet)...are you guys mute? EVERYBODY! (Laughter.) Hold on one second. (Talks to teens.) EVERYBODY! (Everybody.) GIVE ME AN "H"! (Give me an "h".) And the congregation said, (H.) Oh, I see some of you are assuming the posture of the casual observer, right? I totally get it, I total understand. Are you ready? GIVE ME AN "O"! (Give me an "O") (O!) GIVE ME AN "L"! (Give me a...) L, m, n, L. GIVE ME AN "L"! (Give me an "L") Boy, you've got to...there's got to be some body involvement here, okay? So, you ready? GIVE ME AN "I"! (Laughter.) Let me try it again. GIVE ME AN "I"! (Give me an "I") GIVE ME AN "N"! (Give me an "N") GIVE ME AN "E"! (Give me an "E") GIVE ME AN "S"! (Give me an "S") GIVE ME AN "S"! (Give me an "S".) WHAT'S IT SPELL? (HOLINESS!) WHAT'S IT SPELL? (HOLINESS!) Follow me this time. WHAT'S IT SPELL? (HOLINESS!) WHAT'S IT MEAN? I don't know, it just know how to spell it, I don't know what it means! Thank you very much. (Applause.)

No, I don't know what it means. Colossians 3, listen to the words of the Apostle Paul as he writes to the church of Colossae, verse 12: Therefore as God's chosen people who were holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, with kindness, with humility, with patience and gentleness. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you are called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Most of the time I would say I really like the progression of this particular narrative, but I'm not so sure I'm comfortable with the first part. As the Apostle Paul is addressing the believers in Colossae and he's saying that you are loved and that you are holy, we have some pushback a bit when we relate that word to ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ who are far more comfortable at times identifying ourselves as a sinner. But Jesus in his sacrifice and

death upon the cross and resurrection from the dead provided for the deliverance, the freedom of the captives to make sure the Gospel recorded it, setting us free from the bondage of sin and death. Some people think, well, to be holy is never to sin. That's not what the scripture teaches. But to be holy is to be freed up from the nature of sin so that I do have a choice as to whether I sin or not if I fall prey to temptation. But God has provided a way out according to Paul in Corinthians 10, so that we can stand up against temptation and live in the spirit of holiness.

There are two words in the Christian lexicon that really disappeared over the last number of years in the faith community. The first is sin itself. We don't like the word, we don't talk about the word much, we would much rather opt for mistakes and we do this all the time. You'll hear national athletic figures, political figures, mystery figures and ourselves, we'll often talk about the mistakes that we commit because mistakes is kind of a softer word, but the issue of mistakes regarding wrong decision making results in a different response rather to admit to the fact that I committed a sinful act.

If I see Susie's, what's that, oh, it's a hymnal. What's here that belongs to you? (I have a tissue.) A tissue? Is that all you got? A tissue! I'm going to stretch this metaphor pretty... okay, so, I am next to Susie, as I was and I see her tissue on the floor, thinking, I need one of those, that's my tissue and I take that tissue, boy this is really stretching it out, thinking it was mine and I realize it before I blow my nose and say, "Excuse me, Susie, I took your tissue." But if I see her tissue in her wallet or her purse or her Bible, thinking "I'd like to have that," and swipe it from her, there is no mistaking it. That was an intentional and deliberate choice, a wrong choice, a sinful act. What that will require for the conviction of the Spirit if I'm responsive to it, is for me to return to Susie, face to face and apologize and ask for her forgiveness. Knowing Susie even as briefly as I do, we've been together now for three Sunday, she will say, "That's okay, Stephen." Clearly that's exactly what she would say. She would say, "I forgive you, Stephen."

That word sin has really fallen on hard times within our Christian vocabulary, but so has the word holiness. We just don't like it, except when you read the scriptures and you see that those by virtue of their relationship with Jesus Christ are called to be holy. We aren't holy, but if we actually work with the Spirit within us because of Christ, not by ourselves. We struggle because we get these images of Pharisaic rules in our mind and we think well, a person who would say I'm a holy person is someone with their spiritual nose up in the air and walks around with nothing but robes and... But it's still there in the back of my mind.

But holiness has nothing to do with outward appearance. Holiness is a reflection of the Christ-like character we carry within us. Therefore, when the Apostle Paul wrote these letters, this is how he addressed it to the Romans. He said: To those of you loved by God and called to be holy..." To the Corinthians he writes: "To those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called as a holy people..." To the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, he addresses all of them by saying: To those who are holy in Christ Jesus. He doesn't say: To

you filthy sinners living in Colossae...

All I'm suggesting to you is by virtue of a relationship with Jesus we are transformed from darkness into light, all things become real. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, old things are gone, new things have come, this is a gift of God. No one is close in this, except for what Christ has done in our lives, has called us to live out a faith that engages the world, that is darkened in nature and encounters the life of Christ in persons just like us to the point where Jesus would say something seemingly so audacious: Let your light shine before all men and women so they see the good things that we do to bring glory to our Father in Heaven. There is nothing audacious about that from Jesus' point of view. It is not like Austin the dog trying to reproduce this on his own. We're not, I'm not gritting my teeth and clenching my fist and walking around saying: I will be holy. It is an act of surrender. It is a surrender to the personal Christ who is at work within us by the Spirit and Paul teaches us in Corinthians that this Spirit is cultivating and transforming Christ-like character within us daily.

So, the very experiences that we all have in the course of any day throughout the week is an opportunity for the Spirit to be at work within us producing these Christ-like qualities that are defined here in Colossians 3. Listen to it: Clothe yourselves, put on this nature of Christ which is compassion, kindness, humility, there's no arrogance here, there's haughtiness, there's no exalting ourselves above anybody else, gentleness, and patience, forgiveness...to forgive whatever grievances we may have against someone. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven us. It's just a reflection. So, I have received forgiveness from Christ, so I am compelled by the Spirit regardless of what I face to extend the forgiveness.

Something terrible happened in October of 2006 in a little unknown town in Lancaster County by the name of Nickel Mines, where a perpetrator, Charles Roberts put his truck up against the little Amish schoolhouse and carried in a 9mm handgun and ordered the boys to go to his truck and get the rest of his stuff, boards and weapons and he boarded up the schoolhouse. Some of the people were evacuated quickly to try to find some help. But he retained ten little Amish girls and sent everybody else out. The police arrived quickly, they were doing everything they knew to avoid the tragic event, but it wasn't avoided. Because in this horrific fact that you can't get your mind around where someone would commit such an atrocity against someone else. Eight of those ten girls were shot, lined up against the wall. Five of them succumbed. Three made it through. Maybe like you I have had loss in my life. I've had to say goodbye to a lot of people. But I never had any of those losses as a result of murder. Maybe someone here has experienced it. I would be hard for me to get around the pain that someone would feel with loss is tough enough, even when you see it coming, it's rough. But to have loved one and one so young, multiples so young murdered within a given community, a caring community. It caught the attention not just of Lancaster County or the state. It caught the attention of the country. But beyond the horrific act, something else rose prominently that ushered in the theological debate on the date the newspapers projected headlines of the Amish community's response: Forgiven. The people were scratching their heads and I can remember sitting in Applebee's with one of my dear friends listening to conversation of the

people of the next table saying, "Nobody can do that. I would never do that. We can't do something like that." The waitress walked up and said, "You guys know the news of this?" We know the news. "Nobody can really forgive like that." And we said, "Oh, yes, they can." And for those members of that particular Amish community it's not just verbiage. There voices spoke it to Mrs. Roberts and her children. They went right to her house and spoke forgiveness shortly after the incident, but they raised funds to make sure that his kids could have the chance to go to college if they wanted to. There were drives even around our area for this community. How can you reconcile that? Because we have been forgiven we find the strength and are compelled to forgive. Again it's not something I simply feel on my own, it's a reflection of what Christ has accomplished in my life. I am forgiven and I am mandated to forgive.

When you think of the illustration that I just used there and then we reflect upon some of the grievances that we might have towards others and, not to suggest that they are not significant and severe, but forgiveness is the only option that God offers in light of inflicted pain but just as we have been forgiven.

A woman was in my office a couple of years ago reflecting some of the horrors of her life's journey, people who have hurt her and I think some of whom did it intentionally and we got to talking about it and I raised the issue of forgiveness and she slapped her fist on my desk and said, "You don't know how badly I've been hurt." You are exactly right, I don't. Conversely, you don't know how I've been hurt and we really don't understand the fullness of the pain inflicted on Christ either. We don't necessarily understand that from the fullness of God with us experiencing the horrific treatment that he endured, even to death on the cross. And yet, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Forgive, grant us peace, gratitude, patience, the reflection of the life lived in submission to God. And you can't necessarily sniff that out just by looking at somebody...oh, that person looks holy. I don't know what that would be like. It's not in terms of physical issues. When I was teaching I was referring to Isaiah 52-53 and talking about the prophetic utterings of this servant about the Messiah that is coming and in Isaiah 52 it basically says that wasn't anything in his physical appearance that would be naturally drawn to. We were talking about the person of Christ and after that, shortly after returning home...those were the days of landline, corded phones, I told my students, remember those? No, I don't remember those. I picked up the phone and, "Stephen, this is Eleanor!" I recognized the point. "I am so angry at you!" "Eleanor, why are you so angry at me?" "You told my kid tonight that Jesus was ugly and that's not within my view of who Jesus is." Whoa, whoa, whoa! And I didn't get a word in edgewise and she went on for about five minutes and ripped me up one side and down the other because she supposed that I told her kid that Jesus was ugly. And when she took a breath, I got a word in, and said I was referring to Isaiah 52-53 and I told her what I was teaching. And after quoting her what I was teaching, it got real quiet on the other end...that stuff doesn't matter. We are called to release, to forgiveness and pray the Lord allows our emotions to line up with the act of our will, the act of holiness.

In 1 Peter this has been: Just as he who called Jesus holy, we get that, God is holy, just as he who called Jesus holy, so be holy in all we do. It is written be holy because I am holy. Be a forgiver because he forgives. Be compassionate because he has extended that compassion and grace and mercy evidenced to each of us. Be Christ-like through the surrender of our sins. The Apostle Paul put it this way: I die daily but Christ liveth within me. I must align myself with Christ every day. All kinds of stuff faces us to be forced to do. But can you connect every day with Christ so that we might walk in obedience with him.

I share with my students before your feet hit the floor in the morning, commit your day, your life, your family to God so that when interruptions occur, we have the capacity to see them as divine appointments and to live out this Christ-like life among them.

So, Beloved, I am going to say to you the same thing Jesus said to all of us: Let your light shine. Again, not something reproduced, but the reflection of the surrender of the Christ-like character in us before all men and women we connect with that when people would see the things that we do to give glory to our Father.

We are going to do some finger pointing. I think finger-pointing often has negative connotation with it. No finger-pointing of judgement, none of that. Finger-pointing to who He is, where all eyes would see Him alive in this world through this finger and people.