

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. June Barrow**  
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**The Courage for Community**  
**Colossians 3:12-14**

Once in a seminary class of mine, a professor was lecturing on some of the practical realities of life in a congregation. He mentioned small conflicts, large conflicts, hurt feelings, misunderstandings and the human instinct to blame. A student in the class said, "I don't want to be in a church like that; I want to be in a church full of normal people." And of course the professor replied, "These ARE the normal people." In fact, one of John Ortberg's books is called *Everyone is Normal Until You Get To Know Them*.

So how do we live together in genuine community? Here is Paul's advice to the Colossian church, to that group of believers who are doing life together, a community of faith:

**As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all of these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)**

Here are the qualities Paul names. We are to become:

- Compassionate
- Kind
- Humble
- Gentle
- Patient
- Tolerant
- Forgiving
- Loving

Note that Paul calls these qualities *virtues*. No one is born with them; they aren't simply qualities all nice people have. They are virtues, acquired over a lifetime of disciplined, practiced Christian faith. They are virtues, formed in us by a thousand small choices over many years in many relationships.

Let's make three points about living together in community:

- Everyone is unique.
- Nobody's perfect.
- We are made for each other.

**First point: Everyone is unique.**

For instance, some of us are extroverts and some are introverts. How many of you know that you are an extrovert? Will you raise your hands? And how many of you are introverts? Will you raise your hands? Actually, there are more introverts than this, but you aren't even willing to raise your hands, are you? Why? Because you are introverts. And whether you are an extrovert or an introvert has to do with your God-created temperament. Neither is better than the other. Thank goodness, we don't live in a world with nothing but extroverts. How noisy that would be! And thank goodness, we don't live in a world with nothing but introverts. How quiet that would be!

Just this week I read about another such difference, one called the GABA factor. GABA stands for gamma amino butyric acid, a neurotransmitter. Some of us have more and some have less. Those with higher amounts are less sensitive to adrenaline, so that people who are on the high end of the GABA curve might jump out of airplanes, snowboard, hang-glide, and ride motorcycles. They tend to be risk-takers. Those on the other end of the curve, those with lesser amounts of GABA, are more sensitive to adrenaline and tend to be risk-avoiders. Therefore, it's quite possible that someone with less GABA might feel more anxious about walking into a social gathering where small talk is expected than someone else would feel about jumping out of an airplane. (from John Ortberg's book, *Everyone Is Normal Until You Get to Know Them*)

Listen to this line from a song: "The space between ourselves sometimes is more than the distance between the stars..." Feeling alone in a group, feeling that somehow everyone else in the room is included but that you are on the outside—that is a 100% universal experience. All of us know the feeling to some extent. But some of us know it too well; it's very familiar. Connecting with others feels risky and difficult. So let's say again that community requires courage and for some it requires enormous courage. For all of you who keep trying to connect in community even though it's hard for you, good for you! We respect you and thank you.

Again, here are the community virtues, the virtues we are learning over a life-time. We are to become:

- Compassionate
- Kind
- Humble
- Gentle
- Patient
- Tolerant
- Forgiving
- Loving

**Second Point: Nobody's perfect.**

Jesus said: "Don't judge or you too will be judged." (Matthew 7:1) This is a command that we are often willing to qualify, but how would our experience of community change if we took it seriously? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating" (*The Cost of Discipleship*). I think he meant this: When you stand before another person and are quick with your judgment, it's as though you are saying that you know all about this person, that you completely understand his situation, that you can sum up him and his life.

Such judgment blinds from seeing more deeply and clearly. For instance, all of us who have been married a long time, is your own spouse still a mystery to you in some ways?

But when we are as loving as we can be, when we are restrained in our judgments, patient and humble, the lights can begin to go on. We can grow in our depth of understanding of one another.

This call to be restrained in making quick judgments is not a call to rescind the moral order of the universe or revoke the Ten Commandments. It is an invitation to speak less and listen more, to be less quick with our opinions, to sit with respect before another. I remember the freedom of learning this lesson: “To listen with respect does not mean that I agree.” It simply means that I am choosing to listen, to receive another person with respect and restraint. What freedom there is in knowing that on a terrible day, you can speak freely to someone who will understand that tomorrow you might see things differently, that you might not mean everything you are saying in a moment of great distress. James in his letter gives this advice: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to grow angry...” (James 1:19)

Again, here are the community virtues we are seeking to acquire. We are becoming:

Compassionate

Kind

Humble

Gentle

Patient

Tolerant

Forgiving

Loving

### **Third Point: We are made for each other.**

This is the lesson that Pachomius learned in 315 A.D.\* Pachomius was a soldier who was converted to be a follower of Jesus. He was baptized in 315, ardent in his new faith. At that time, the model of serious spiritual growth required a life of solitude and prayer, a life lived strictly between God and oneself. But after a time Pachomius asked these questions:

How can you learn to love if no one else is around?

How can you learn humility living alone?

How can you learn kindness or gentleness or goodness in isolation?

How can you learn patience unless someone puts yours to the test?

What Pachomius learned is true. I need your eyes on my life and you need mine. We see the glory of God in one another. If you have been in this church for some time, here is a question. Can you look around this room and see someone you respect, someone you admire? And would that person be surprised to know it?

We can see the glory of God’s life shining in one another, but we can’t see it clearly in our own life. A painting by Rembrandt, called *The Man with the Golden Helmet*, offers an image of this. Like you, I’ve seen many pictures of great soldiers, like Napoleon Bonaparte, in history books.

They are posed portraits; the soldiers wear clean, bright uniforms with gleaming buttons. They wear a look of practiced valor. But this painting is different. The artist spotted a soldier trudging home on foot, coming home from the war. He is weary, covered with the debris of war. The painting is dark; his eyes are downcast, lost perhaps in memories of what he has seen, where he has been, what he has done. If he were to look down at himself, all that he would see is that he is mud-stained and blood-stained. But the artist, from where he stands, can see that the man's brass helmet reflects the light of the sun. A light shines on him.

When my eyes are on your life, I can stand before you and say, "I can hear how you are trying to forgive, and I admire that." Or "I think you have been very brave in your decision." Or "You are working hard to tell the whole truth about this difficult problem and I respect you for it." Or "You have survived and that's amazing." I can see the glory of God in your life, but I cannot see it very well in my own. We need each other.

Again, here are the community virtues. Paul tells us in Colossians we are to work at becoming:

- Compassionate
- Kind
- Humble
- Gentle
- Patient
- Tolerant
- Forgiving
- Loving

What if you were met with compassion... kindness... humility... gentleness... patience... tolerance... forgiveness... and love.... How safe would you feel? How much would you relax? What would it mean to you?

And who needs you? Who needs your eyes on their lives? Who needs you to receive them as they are? Who needs your prayers? Who needs you?

Abraham Heschel was a brilliant man, a scholar who wrote many books. Let's close with a quote by him: "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people."

\*This information is found in the journal Leadership, Spring, 1993.