

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Beloved _ Characteristic of a Beloved Community
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Well, happy 2021 to you. I know we're several weeks in but this is my first opportunity to be with you in this way in 2021 so I'm excited. Not only am I excited, but I'm grateful for so many of you, especially those of you who are watching online from around the country and around the world and even you who are in your homes and those who are gathered here live. It's good to see your faces, good to be in the house.

Well, the year was 1926 right here in Washington, DC, probably about 10 years into what would have been or what was a 50 year movement when 6 million black people predominantly in the south, they moved north, they moved to the Midwest, and they moved west. It was known as the Great Migration. And I imagine that historian and writer, Dr. Carter G. Woodson envisioned a new America, an America that would value equally the humanity and the hands of those who had helped build America. Dr. Woodson established what was known as Negro History week, the second week in February. Now we know it as Black History Month not because black people needed their day in the sun we had already been reduced to that as three fifths of a man. But Dr. Woodson, I could imagine him wanting young people a new generation to know what their ancestors had done, but also envisioning that this new integration would be like known elements coming together in a different way to hopefully produce something better. Black people would no longer be reduced to a commodity that was bought and sold but recognized as an integral contributor.

Now, I don't believe that the goal was just acceptance, to feel like we belonged as a people, but perhaps an embrace in hopes of feeling beloved. This is why I think that Black History Month is significant. Many lives have been lost in the fight and yes, there's been legislation passed to create space for us to belong, but the fight is still for us to be beloved.

This week, we kick off a new series entitled, Beloved. Now, this isn't a black history series, it will go on into March and it won't be a woman's history series. But I do think that the black-white divide and what we've seen with gender discrimination, and currently what we're seeing with our Asian brothers and sisters, I do think that that these are moments right now or have been moments in history, and a jumping off point present day examples that the Scriptures speak a lot about. The story of the Bible is God pursuing his beloved creation, to both repair, redeem and restore. Jesus is the embodiment of this example and those who follow him should reflect that. But I don't know about you, as I look at the landscape of things that have been happening, especially as of recent day, I believe that the Jesus followers seem to need a little bit of clarity on what that means.

So this weekend, I'd love for you to meet me in Colossians chapter number three, with this guy named Paul, who's written the majority of the New Testament. And he's writing many of these letters now he's writing letters to Jesus followers in a place called Colossae and he's doing what Paul normally does in these letters, he's encouraging Jesus followers to have the proper perspective.

But before I do that, allow me to take the baton from Pastor Mark from last weekend and touch on these three things that he talked to us about. Imagine that you were coming to my house to eat; we were having a meal together. And you arrived and you saw these items, not in bags, but in a bowl displayed properly. But we've got a little bit of spinach here, we've got some, some kale, and we've got some carrots and even some, what is this some different kind of lettuce here as well, three different kinds of greenery, basically. We've got some tomatoes, and you know, some of y'all like, you know, a little bit more exotic salads with, you know, almonds and apples and cranberries and different things like that, not that there's anything wrong with that but cucumbers, and then you know, a few different salad dressing. I wouldn't have to tell you, you know what these things were or why they were assembled. Now just for the sake of carrying over what Pastor Mark talked to us about last week, this would be a picture of diversity, right. So you got these different items representing different things, they have different tastes, and they have different textures, and all those sorts of things but this is what diversity looks like. And diversity has been a buzzword in our culture. It's been stuff we've talked about in the church. But I think we've just reduced it to just this display, this heterogeneous display and we've been just kind of stuck here and we've been okay with this.

But then there's this next phase called unity, right. And so you would know that these items represented together here on the table would probably make up a salad, but it isn't a salad until they're together in the same bowl, mixed together. And when they're unified together as a salad, they don't become something different, they still are lettuce, they still are our tomatoes, they still are all of these items together. But they have come together; they're unified around a purpose, to be a salad.

Then there's another step after that, because the ingredients don't unite to become a salad for themselves. They come together to be to be nourishment to whoever is going to consume them. They come together to benefit whoever is going to consume them. And so my friends, this diversity, this movement from diversity to unity to a beloved community is what we are intending to be not so we can be exclusive to ourselves. But so we can be poured out and so we can be nourishment so that we can better those who encounter us.

I think you all got the point that I was trying to make and what Pastor Mark talked about last week. And I just want to say that we must understand as a beloved community. I love the way my friend, Pastor Mike Kelsey says that he says, "We're not united against the world we're united for the world."

So Paul is writing to these Jesus followers, and he's trying to encourage them and warn them and equip them. And he's trying to give them the opposite perspective of the world that they were living in and the

world that we still currently live in. The Colossians needed to guard against a couple of things, which is why Paul was writing this letter. They needed to guard against these Jewish zealots who are all about the ceremonial laws. That's what they were focused on. And this was trying to infiltrate this group of Jesus followers and confuse them. And then there were these Gentile philosophies, things that had nothing to do with following Jesus that was just trying to creep up in and cause division. And so Paul is trying to set the record straight and it's the same for us, right, like we have these ritualistic things that are happening, right. That people tend to put more emphasis on really just boxes that we want to check.

And then we've got these Christian philosophies that say if you're a Christian, you are supposed to do some of these but they're not biblically rooted, or grounded. So Paul starts out in Colossians, talking about the centrality of Christ. This is the launching off point. This is where we take our point of reference, all the way through Colossians to how we should live as believers. And in the beginning of Colossians, he says, we should put away these old things, these old mindsets and all of this, this stuff that's going on that hinders us. And we should also put aside division, he said, in Christ, there's no Greek, no Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, no slave, nor free, nor barbarian all of these different labels. It's none of that in Christ,

And then we pick up in verse number 12, which is where we will spend our time this weekend to verse 17. Paul says, "*Therefore,*" now he's saying, therefore, in light of all of these things that he said, we should take off and the right mindset that we should have, the right perspective. Now, when I read these words, and I understand the context, and the intent, or Paul's intent to clarify, I think I can summarize what Paul is saying in really three ways or three categories or three words, this weekend. And those three words or those three categories would be, I think, Paul is saying that there are some things that we should intentionally wear in terms of our characteristics. And there is an intentional way that we should work in terms of how we engage with one another in and how we fight for community and then finally, an intentional expression of our witness what we wear, how we work, and our witness.

"¹² Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

I want to just spend most of our time focusing on those first couple of verses 12 through 14, and I want you to walk with me through what Paul is saying here. I think this is a relevant categorization for us because this is how we evaluate people. This is how we look at it. We look at what they wear, we make an assumption. We look at what they do, or their occupation, and how they engage in the world, we

make an assumption. And we look at their witness in terms of what do they stand for, what do they stand against, and we make an assumption or we make a judgment. But I love how Paul is elevating these things for us giving us a new perspective, but still using these very kind of earthly categories of way of thinking when he talks about how what we should wear.

So let's start there, what we should wear. Notice, Paul says put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Let's just take a walk with me through these things. I want to unpack them for us. I'm not sure that we fully understand exactly what Paul means, even though we know what these words mean. First of all, all of these things are similar to what he wrote in Galatians. And so a lot of what you see when you read Paul's writings that a lot of things are repeated. And he mentioned some of the same things they're known as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians five. But he says put on or wear, it's a Greek word called *enduo* and it literally means to sink in to the garment. It almost means like to be enveloped by. And so we are to sink into or be enveloped by first compassion that's shifting from condemnation to this, this internal longing for something to be made, right. In other words, it's an elevated consciousness of someone else's distress and then this longing that can't be fixed it be made right. So, when we see things in the world, we should feel compassion. We should feel that is not right and it needs to be adjusted. It's like what we're seeing with our Asian brothers and sisters right now is all over the internet and social media, these things that are happening, we should feel like that needs to be addressed. That's compassion. It moves us to action, not just sympathy to say, "Oh, that's bad." No, it moves us to want to take action.

Then next, he says that we should put on kindness. Now listen, I gotta tell you, I'm about to mess you up real quick. This is not about being nice. The Greek word here for kindness means moral goodness or integrity. Let me break that down. So this is what this means, in the face of immorality, bad things happening around us. What do we do? We respond with goodness. That's what kindness means, we respond with goodness. And this is precisely why Paul says that we should put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, filthy language; we shouldn't lie to one another. All those things are not good. Now, side note, when he says anger, he's talking about a kind of anger that leads you to do things you shouldn't do. There's a certain anger that is a righteous anger. He's not talking about that. But put these things aside because they don't lead to goodness. This is also precisely why Jesus elevates, what Jesus elevates in Matthew five. He says be salt and light, love your enemies, pray for the people who persecute you. I mean, you can just stop right there, that's hard enough. And then he says, if you love only people that love you how are you different? How are you different? I wish I could just spend more time here, but I gotta keep moving.

Next, he says, put on humility. Now this particular word here in the Greek, it literally means a humble opinion of yourself. I gotta tell this quick story. So I have the opportunity right now two days a week to teach theology to freshmen in high school. It's a tremendous challenge. Can y'all just pray for me add that to your prayer list? But really, really good and it's so helpful for me. And we were talking about recently the last like week and a half we've been talking about David. And we've been talking about

David's humility. And we specifically zeroed in on how when David was anointed to be the next king. If you don't know the story is David was going to be anointed the next king, the previous King had hired him to be a general and then like, just started hating on him and then wanted to kill him. And so David, he's got his own man, he is a skilled warrior he can take Saul out, but he runs. He literally like spends three or four chapters, like running from and hiding and has opportunity to kill Saul, but he does it. And so you know what my students said, "Hey, Mr. Symonette, hey that dude, David was scared, bro. Like that dude, David with Saul. Like, I would have took him out." They did not value humility at all.

And then check this out. I was telling them about this book I read, man almost like 20 years ago, it's called *The Leadership Challenge*. It's a great leadership book, leadership staple book, like it's been printed like eight different times eight editions. And they did this study about their most admired traits of leaders, right? Over all these decades, and 13 different countries, the same four characteristics, keep coming to the top, and it has bothered me ever since I read the book, honesty, competence, inspiring, forward, looking. All of those things are great, but you know what's bad? When you go down the entire list of all the other things, humility is not even on the list, not even on the list. And you know what that says to me? It says that we view humility secondarily, or from a tertiary state, or even if at all. We don't even value it. But how can we be a beloved community without humility? How can we have a high view of ourselves and a low view of others? You know, that's called? A power trip. That's not humility. How can we follow Jesus the picture of humility and be arrogant?

Let me keep moving. Paul says, "*Then we also should put on gentleness.*" Which is related to humility, because it is the expression of humility but the Greek word here is related to meekness and it means that we are to have a high level of care and consideration in an age of casting away and canceling. Now, this is not about being nice, alright and it's not about not addressing issues. It's about how.

Can I tell y'all one of my most consistent prayers over the years? And this was just wisdom from God that I didn't make up. But I just began to pray this, and I pray this regularly. God helped me to be surgical. Because I realized that there are times things have to be addressed. There are times things have to be confronted, and that causes cutting. But the cutting from a surgeon is to promote healing. And so God, if I'm gonna have to cut if I'm gonna have to confront, let it be promoting healing. And that's what gentleness is about. That's why when Paul says in Galatians, again, he says, if your brother or sister falls in sin restore him gently. The unfortunate thing about how we define gentleness or this word meek in our culture, you can look it up in the dictionary, you know what it says? It says deficient in spirit and courage. Yeah, that tells you why we are so quick to cancel because of how we view gentleness and meekness.

Let me keep going. Last one, he says patience. I'm not even gonna spend a whole lot of time on this because we ain't got patient for it anyway.

Long suffering endurance, perseverance, I mean, the pace of our world, we just don't have time for nothing. I mean, we are just so impatient, our communication suffers, our relationships are suffering. I mean, stuff just gets just lost in translation. And I don't know about y'all, I'm an English major so I get tired of reading these articles online with misspelled and punctuation all out of...I'm like, who edited this? Because the value is speed, not necessarily accuracy. So Paul says we should put on these things. This is about what we wear these certain characters.

Then he said there's a certain way that we should work. And when I say work, I'm talking about this working with one another this interaction. He says that we should bear with one another, forgiving one another. Again, in Galatians, he repeats this, he said that we should carry one another's burdens in this way you fulfill the law of Christ.

Let me mess y'all up real quick. The word bearing that Paul is using here, it means to suffer and endure with. See that's the problem right there. Because if I want to, if I see that you are a burdened, I will be, I will feel better about helping you relieve your burdens, if I could, than to help you carry them. And see, part of our issue with the church and American missions and this missions movement that we have seen is we've done more damage, because we're trying to eliminate burdens as opposed to entering into the suffering with. And that's part of the reason why we continue to have the divide that we have in our country right now is because people want to legislate the problem out. People want to write a check to the problem to get it out of way. We don't want to enter into suffering. But that entering into suffering is the gift because it elevates for us understanding. It brings us closer together; it helps us to empathize with one another. And oh, by the way, clarify how we might help better.

Let me keep going. I gotta give a shout out here to when I talk about missions to our A1:8 team because there's so good at how they train us. They're just so good at how they help us think about "Hey, when we go we are going to identify with. We are going to engage with. We are not going to save. We are not going to limit. We're going to learn. We're going to have the right posture. Why? Because this is what Jesus did. He entered into our suffering. Fully God, fully man, but yet entered in with us.

Let me keep moving, the last one. So we talked about wear, we talked about work and the last one is our witness. This is about our reputation, our reflection it's the proof. And Paul simply says "*Above all, put on love because it's the most important.*" He says love is the perfect bond of unity. Now we've heard this word love. Many of us have heard it, termed agape. It's ah-GAH-peh, it's how it's pronounced. It is unconditional love. And then this word bond that Paul talks about is related to ligaments, all right. And then unity is about completeness.

So let me paint this picture for you real quick. Love is like a ligament, all right. And let's think about a ligament on a body, right? A ligament holds things in right relationship. That's what it does for optimum functionality. Okay. And so if a ligament is damaged or torn, there's pain to the body, and it limits its functionality. So the result is the bone typically that the ligament is meant to hold in place is now out of

right relationship and can't function the way that it's supposed to. And so what Paul is saying is the agaphe or ah-GAH-peh, is what keeps us in right relationship with God and one another. That's why he says, above all, because that's the thing that's holding everything together. And that is our witness. And I'll proof to the world of who we say we follow. And guess what out of that flows humility, and compassion, and gentleness, and patience, and all of these things that Paul is talking about. That's why he says, above all, because it's holding all of that stuff together without an agenda, unconditionally. This is what a beloved community looks like. And this is why Jesus said, Matthew seven, "They will know a tree by its fruit."

My dad used to tell me, "Son, just be patient. Go ahead and take a seat and just watch. They're gonna tell on themselves. You will learn, just watch. You will know the tree by its fruit." Jesus also said, "Love is how people will know that you are my disciples." Love, not by your strategy, not by your education, not by all of these boxes, we check, no. Love and just think about it for a second. I'm talking about the kind of love that responds in a way that just catches people off guard. They just can't even categorize or fathom why in the world, you would do that? What is the motivation because the math doesn't add up? And you know what, for God to come down out of heaven, put on human flesh and die and become a sacrifice and raise himself that don't make sense, either. Because you know what my theology students said? They say, "Mr. Sym, why God just didn't start over?" And I'm like, "Yeah, that's a great question." But you know the answer to that question is because he's passionately pursuing you, and he wants to restore what has been broken, and he wants to be in relationship with you. It's about you. He personally loves his creation.

Let me just end this weekend with this. Let me bring it to a close with this. I mean, crazy story that I heard about a couple of weeks ago. It happened about eight years ago and I think it's a picture of what a beloved community looks like. I heard about this runner, or this race, I should say. It's the Burlada cross country race in Spain, and this was back in 2013. And the final moments of the race is a Kenyan brother. And you know, the Kenyans man they know for them long distance runs. And so the Kenyan brother is doing his thing. He's way out in front. His name is Abel Mutai, and he's a bronze medal winner of 3000 meter race in the London Olympics in 2012. So the previous year, he had just you know, medaled. And then in the distant second place, was a Spaniard by the name of Ivan Fernandez Anaya. And Abel Mutai, the Kenyan runner, I mean, he's the inevitable winner. People are cheering, he's coming down the stretch and all of a sudden, he stops 10 meters before the finish. And so Anaya, is coming up behind him and he sees that he stopped. And instead of Anaya passing him, he gets behind his Kenyan competitor and pushes him all the way to the finish, and still finishes second when he had the opportunity to win. Now, we all know that just doesn't happen. That's not the way of the world. And it's interesting to hear what Ivan said. He said, "I did not deserve to win it. He was the rightful winner." He's talking about the Kenyan runner. And obviously, that is a remarkable story and a remarkable gesture. But what really caught me off, what really made this the perfect way to end our time together this weekend is what the coach said. Listen to what the coach said and this is Ivan Fernandez Anaya's running coach. He said, "It's an honorable gesture. I mean, I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have wasted the opportunity." But

listen to what he said. He said, "Winning always makes you more of an athlete, you have to go out and win." Now, isn't that the perfect picture of what Paul is saying? Paul is saying like, if you follow Jesus, you need to be over here with this mindset because you need to be far away from this mindset that's only concerned about itself. That is counter to what God is calling us to, it's the perfect example. And listen, nobody would have faulted Anaya if he had have won a race first and then went back and help him. That's probably what most people would have done. And the way that the coach responded, is just how normal people respond, that's normal in life. But it's not what Ivan Fernandez Anya did - a picture of what Paul is saying. To put on all of these things, and to engage with your brothers and sisters, bearing their burdens, like with them. And then putting on love, like he had compassion for this guy who had run out I mean, they ran a long way y'all. He had compassion. He's 10 meters away, and he's just gonna, he's gonna stop.

In a world that values winning at all costs, condemning and canceling. God has called us to be like Jesus, who sacrificed for us, who called us his beloved. And to be a disciple of Jesus, we must be love, and be known by it if we are going to call ourselves beloved.

I just want to pray real quick for two groups and we're gonna close. The first group is those of us who are Jesus followers. We need everything that Paul is reminding us of, and the Holy Spirit is going to have to help us do it because we can't do it on our own. We are not that strong, we are not that good. And then for those of us who are exploring faith, or considering following Jesus and you're, you're trying to navigate through this. I'm gonna pray that God continues to illuminate for you what this looks like and invite you into this glorious journey.

God, we thank you so much for who you are. Thank you for this reminder that you've given us from the Apostle Paul. Help us to take off all of the things that go against what you're calling us to. Help us to put on the fruits of the Spirit. Help us to bear with one another in love and to forgive. And above all, help us to put on love. For my brother and sister who is searching for faith and looking for example, God you have invited us into this beloved community. You're the story of the Bible is you pursuing us that can feel that love and be willing to take a step into this beloved community. These things we ask in your son Jesus name. Amen.

And speaking of invitations, we have a special invitation for you all this weekend. Normally, we would end our our time together with a time of worship. But what we wanted to do this weekend is we wanted to invite you into the struggle and the suffering of our black brothers and sisters of African descent, as we celebrate Black History Month. And so there's a song that I don't know if you've heard of called Lift Every Voice and Sing and so we're gonna sing that song. My brother Joel is going to lead us in that this weekend. It's known as the black national anthem, and it became this staple during the Civil Rights Movement. And the song was written 121 years ago, February 12th, 1900, originally as a poem by James Weldon Johnson. And so we'd love for you to sing along if you know the words or at least listen to these words and hear the pain and the hope in these lyrics. I bless you guys as we sing together.