

Colossians 3:1-4 (Eighth Sunday after Pentecost—Series C)

“Be What You Are”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

July 31, 2022

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Epistle lesson from Colossians 3:

¹Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, be seeking the things above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. ²Be setting your minds on the things above, not on the things on the earth. ³For you died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. ⁴Whenever Christ, your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

“You are what you eat.” This proverbial saying suggests that in order to be fit and healthy, you need to eat good food. In 1826, the French lawyer Brillat-Savarin wrote, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” In an 1863 essay titled *Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism*, Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach wrote: “Der Mensch ist, was er ißt.” Man is what he eats. They were saying that the food one eats has a bearing on one’s state of mind and health. In the 1930s, American nutritionist Victor Lindlahr, a strong believer in the idea that food controls health, developed the Catabolic Diet. That view gained some adherents at the time and the earliest known printed example is from an advertisement for beef in a 1923 edition of the *Bridgeport Telegraph* for United [Meat] Markets, “Ninety per cent of the diseases known to man are caused by cheap foodstuffs. You are what you eat.” In the opening verses of today’s Epistle text, we have the apostle Paul encouraging believers in Jesus to be not what they eat, but rather, “Be Who You Are.”

Let’s face it, Christians don’t always act like Christians. You act selfishly, in your own interest, under the disguise of “doing it for the Lord.” You refuse to forgive and be reconciled because you think that you are right. Just look at all the ways that you as believers in Jesus

live with your minds set “on the things on the earth.” No, we’re not talking about the ordinary, everyday things of this earth. We’re talking about things that are evil, that are contrary to the Word of God and thus are unbecoming for the believer. More than that, they are sinful and cause the wrath of God against you. What are these things on the earth that you so eagerly embrace? Paul tells you in our Epistle: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk. Lying, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, which is idolatry (Col. 3:5–9 ESV).

When your sinful nature wars against the Holy Spirit and you give it free reign, what a mess it makes of your life and the lives of others! Hateful words are spoken. You do not put others first because you want things to be your way and you demand it, even at the cost of hurting brothers and sisters in Christ. Your sinful flesh, consumed by self-importance, instinctively looks down on others and inevitably causes interpersonal tensions. These are the attitudes and behaviors that disrupt Christian fellowship. This is not how Christians have been called to live, with minds set on the things on the earth. Galatians 5, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:13–16 ESV).

When Christians are controlled by their sinful nature and fall prey to the devil and the wickedness of the world, they are no longer being what they are—baptized children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus! This not only hurts one another, but the whole Church, and gives a terrible witness to the Lord Jesus.

The foundation of what you are in Christ is your Baptism. Paul's exhortation in Colossians 3, "be seeking the things above," "be setting your minds on the thing above, not on things on the earth," is grounded in the foundation of your Baptism. You have been raised with Christ in Baptism. In fact, in Baptism you died with Christ. Colossians 3: "For you died." How did you die? With Christ at the cross. Romans 3 says that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death (Rom. 6:3 ESV). In Baptism a person dies to sin and our death to sin in Baptism connects us with, and plugs us into, the death of Christ on the cross.

Paul, then, asks the question, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2 ESV). You can't, unless you reject the reality of who you are by allowing sin to have the control in your life. The Church Father Chrysostom described baptismal death to sin like this: "Being dead to sin means not obeying it any more. Baptism has made us dead to sin once and for all, but we must strive to maintain this state of affairs, so that however many commands sin may give us, we no longer obey it but remain unmoved by it, as a corpse does."¹ Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism* on Holy Baptism that Baptism "signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be **drowned and die** with all sins and evil lusts. And also it shows that a new man should daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever."²

¹ Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans*, NT Vol. 6, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 153.

² Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 340.

In Baptism the death of sin occurs because you are locked into the death of Christ who died, once and for all, for the sins of the world. What's more, you are raised with Christ. Dead to sin—risen to new life! Through your incorporation into Jesus' redeeming work, you have been delivered from evil for eternal salvation. And this eternal salvation is the basis of the kind of conduct you also display in this life. Because you are "heirs of eternal life at the return of Christ, Christians are to live in a manner corresponding to life in the holiness of heaven, rather than to a life characteristic of conduct on this evil earth."³

By Baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, you are already raised with Christ to life "above." You are new creations! The old has passed away; the new has come! (2 Cor. 5:17). By the power and grace of God the Holy Spirit, you are to pattern your behavior in thought, word, and deed after the sort of life that will characterize your existence "above" in eternity. This is nothing else than God exhorting you as baptized Christians to "be what you already are."

This means that in the power of your Baptism by the work of the Spirit you "put to death what is earthly in you" (Col. 3:5). Drown in the powerful waters of your Baptism those attitudes, behaviors, and words that are characteristic of those under the influence of Satan and their own sinful nature. As Christians who have "put off" the old Adam, the sinful nature, through your Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, daily die to the desires that sin in you suggests. Rise to the new life of faith and put on the virtues of the new Adam (Christ)—a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, and

³ Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 139.

thankfulness. You were dead and were raised to life with Christ in Baptism and now you wear Christ's own virtues as you live the Christian life in word and action. Luther writes in the *Large Catechism*, "So a truly Christian life is nothing other than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. For this must be done without ceasing, that we always keep purging away whatever belongs to the old Adam. Then what belongs to the new man may come forth. But what is the old man? It is what is born in human beings from Adam: anger, hate, envy, unchastity, stinginess, laziness, arrogance—yes, unbelief. The old man is infected with all vices and has by nature nothing good in him. Now, when we have come into Christ's kingdom, these things must daily decrease. The longer we live the more we become gentle, patient, meek, and ever turn away from unbelief, greed, hatred, envy, and arrogance."⁴

In Baptism, you were brought to the Lord Jesus to receive His gifts through faith. You died with Christ. You were raised with Christ. You have the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. You are empowered by the Holy Spirit by means of the Gospel and the Sacraments to be seeking the things above. Through Word and Supper, the Spirit strengthens your faith and increases its fruit in your lives. He gives you new desires so that you strive to overcome sin and to set your minds on the things above and not on the evil things on earth. You are Christians. You are different from the world that does not know Christ Jesus by faith. Be what you are—what God in Christ through the Spirit has recreated you to be. In your words and actions, show humility and Christ-like love. Don't be selfish and continue to think that everything has to be the way you want it or how you think things should be. Do not think of

⁴ Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 430.

yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment, "each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:3–5 ESV). You are baptized children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus! Do not hurt one another with your words and actions. Give a good witness to the Lord Jesus in how you act and speak as those who are setting your minds on the things above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Direct your hearts, minds, words, and actions to Christ. Look to Him who has begun this good work in you and so live out your most holy faith. God grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.