

Grace to you in peace from God, our father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my dear friends in Christ. You may be seated. What'd you get for Christmas? I imagine we would get a variety of answers from all kinds of things that might be interesting, toys, whatever. But I want to tell you a story about a person named Sydney. A few years ago, she was six years old. Her mother bought her a Nativity set, but it was a do-it-yourself set, but it came with rubber molds and the molds needed to be filled with plaster. So her dad went, bought a can of plaster. They stirred it up and poured it into the molds carefully. They waited and then removed each figure from the mold, carefully. Then came the time to paint the characters. Sydney was given a camel to paint, so she took the paint and she started painting the camel, not realizing that the color of the paint would run into different areas of the camel, and it became a blob of mess, and she was terribly upset. So upset, that she took the camel and threw it in the trash.

Well, a few days later, her dad helped her make another camel and it came out perfectly white. However, this time Sydney was not going to start to paint it. Her camel would remain unpainted, a white, pure white. While the other two camels were shaded and painted like the color of a camel, her camel remained pure white. Year after year, the Nativity set was set up, but Sydney's camel remained white. There were no reservations, no criticisms from the family. She and her white camel were accepted. Sydney gives us an example of what Saint Paul is talking about in epistle lesson this morning, as he wrote to the Colossians chapter three, "Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience bearing with one another. And if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you. So you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

So what'd you get for Christmas? We might name a number of gadgets, clothing, or things. But this morning, Saint Paul is asking us, "What do you really focus on this Christmas?"

Do you recall the blessing, the spiritual blessing, and the spiritual qualities that God gives us through Jesus Christ? To recall the relationship that God has established with us in our baptism, to know that that relationship has strengthened and layered, and drawn stronger as we hear the word of God, as we worship and sing praises and hymns, as we gather at the table of the Lord to be touched by the very body and blood of Christ. Those are evidences of how we grow in our relationship with our Lord and how he strengthens us in our walk with him from day to day. That's the significance of who we are, baptized children of God. For as Paul says, "For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body."

Christmas is another opportunity for us to recall that blessing that Jesus brings to us. Because our identity with Jesus, we are exhorted by Saint Paul to bear with one another in love and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness, and that that is a repetitious putting on a new self in our lives. As Luther would say, "We rise up in the morning and we put on a new self."

Remembering our baptism has drowned the old Adam and a new man has come forth. So that is a daily activity of remembering our baptism, our relationship with God. So Saint Paul in our text is saying, "Bear with one another in love and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Sometimes you have to realize life can be difficult, relationships can be strained. The likeness of God seems to be absent or missing. Really, you're a godly person? How do I know this? But you see, those frayed things, those frayed relationships are also calling for restoration, for renewal. That's why Jesus came, to bring us those new ties. I don't know about you, but almost every Christmas we have to watch a Christmas movie. Home Alone ranks pretty high. In that movie, maybe you remember, Kevin is left alone at home and the rest of the family has flown to Paris. And they finally, when they get to Paris, realize they're missing one. Well, most of the movie focuses on Kevin's many antics to foil the robbers as they try to attempt to enter the home. There is one scene where Kevin goes to the church. A choir is rehearsing and preparing for Christmas. His elderly neighbor is also sitting in a pew listening to his granddaughter sing.

A few minutes later, the elderly gentleman comes over to sit with Kevin. It's revealed that he hasn't spoken to his son for a very, very long time. He would not be welcome to attend the service where his granddaughter is singing. They discuss that with Kevin and Kevin suggests, "You ought to just call. Don't be afraid. Call."

At that, the scene ends, and then at the end of the movie, remember what happens? While the family returns to embrace Kevin, Kevin looks out the window to see that his neighbor and his son are united that Christmas. Peace was restored. The emphasis, "Forgive as God has forgiven you," Saint Paul says.

Instead of fear and separation and brokenness, let there be love. To love one another, to grow in that relationship, to rebuild ties. Christmas reminds us again that Jesus Christ came for that very reason, to be our Savior, to bring restoration and renewal. Not only in our relationship with our Heavenly Father, but also a relationship with one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Also, Saint Paul continues in Colossians, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were indeed called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell

in your richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing Psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

Restoration, strengthening of family ties, friendships, building and strong. They occur when we gather for worship, they grow deeper and rooted in one another in our hearts and souls. So what'd you get for Christmas? I pray you received a renewed love for our Lord Jesus, but that also you've deepened and restored a relationship of love with family and friends, even friends here at faith, because putting into practice the bond of peace that Paul talks about, that's the Christmas and that's what Christ brings. Accepting one another as the unique person of God has become a blessing, one of the greatest gifts of Christmas. Remember the white camel I introduced this morning? Sydney recalls, as I hold the unpainted camel in my hands, these decades later, she now is 70.

This old hunk of gypsum speaks to her heart, unpainted and plain, still worthy before God. Worthy in the eyes of God, not because of who I am, but because of what Christ has done for me. There's many unfinished reconciliations in her life and perhaps even in ours. As a side note, Sydney has not been able to communicate to her daughter for over 30 years. Painfully she writes this Christmas letter, hoping and praying that God would open the daughter's heart. Sometimes we can't force reconciliation, but we can pray. I think that's the significant emphasis for all of us as we think about family, friends, that we want to tie together. And sometimes prayer is the only answer for each of us in our own way.

Patience, waiting on the Holy Spirit to bring restoration and peace. But we have a promise from our Lord. Our Heavenly Father does hear our prayers. Our Heavenly Father does answer them. Not always in our timeframe, but in his timeframe, which is perfect. But he does give us that blessing. Call upon the Lord in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you. That deliverance is what Jesus came to bring for you and for me. Deliverance from sin, death, the devil. So you and I can be victorious, to celebrate our precious relationship with Christ, to rejoice in all that he has given to us. The Christmas message, even of the unpainted camel, lets us know that we are accepted as we are, maybe unglorified or however you see yourself, but we are still accepted in God's eyes, because of Christ. Rejoice in that blessing. Celebrate it. Embrace it. Not just at Christmas, but all through this coming year. Our prayer is that you indeed will thrive greatly in 2025. God granted, Jesus name, amen. The peace of God that surpasses...