

God loves this creation --- still. The reading from Hosea paints the image of a parent troubled over a wayward child (Israel); fearing total destruction because of the failure to follow Yahweh's direction.

We know that is a probable scenario for our Creator God. Humankind has failed to live up to the promise and intention of the Creator. We love to be in charge; to manage our own lives; take credit for our accomplishments. We separate ourselves from God. In spite of all this --- God can't stop loving this world. The Psalmist reflects on this reality.

It is time to take stock of ourselves. It is time to consider again how we respond to God's love and grace - in the context of our world in 2016.

It is easy to gather together; to praise and celebrate God's goodness to us. We are glad to take advantage of the abilities and freedoms with which we have been endowed. We like deciding how we shall live; where we shall invest our time, and energy, and commitment. We allow ourselves to be lured into proposals that appear to solve problems; or redirect our focus; situations that fit our free will.

Colossians calls us to remember: that we live as forgiven children of God! We are reminded that we are made new in our baptism. We are raised to live as ones belonging to Christ. This is **not** about self-improvement. This is about Faithfulness - with a capital F!

It is a simple image. It is as easy as changing your clothes! Take off those garments that weigh you down and hold you back. Let go of the things that separate you from God. Become joined once again in relationship to Jesus Christ. Refuse to be distracted by the newest fad in religion or practice. Put them all in the rag bag. Throw them away!

Put on the beautiful, new, comfortable garments that equip and strengthen you for life in Jesus Christ. Allow yourself to be renewed. Focus on the things that build up the community of faith. Let your life present good news to our world. Claim your family name: Christian. Live to bring respect and honor to that name.

It really is surprising to see what can happen when an individual makes an intentional decision to live in lively relationship with Jesus Christ. The whole world takes on a different look. Challenges no longer seem insurmountable when faced within the community of faith.

Live in relationship with Jesus Christ. Remember the gift of forgiveness and grace accomplished in his death and resurrection. That gift frees us to reach out in our desperate world with words and deeds that heal and build up.

We live out our relationship with Jesus Christ as we recognize all of God's people as our neighbors. That begins right here - within this community of faith. "You can't be Christian alone!"

We nurture one another as we worship together. We grow in understanding as we join in study. [My Bread for the World group has been reading together David Lotte's Worldchanging 101. It seems to boil down to: Do what you can, where you are, with what you have, whenever you can.

We support one another as we seek to serve our community in a creative way. We aim to make the Gospel real in our world. As we enjoy the protection of the community and uphold our basic beliefs our relationships deepen.

That's because our faith **is** about relationship. We need each other. We need to experience the safety and protection of a caring community in order to address the questions and challenges of

our time. We need to hear what others are thinking and saying; to recognize the truth that speaks to them; to allow that truth to inform our own thinking - and maybe our action.

It's not just about us! We do benefit significantly from participation in the community of faith. Congregations have become more important in our culture so focused on individual accomplishment and achievement and getting ahead. This is the place where we can test how to make our faith convictions address the challenges of our time. This is where community can happen.

The Gospel parable is about that farmer's inability to think beyond himself and his comfort and security. In Jesus Christ we are freed from worry about security and salvation. We are freed to care for God's entire creation: in global witness through gifts to the denomination; in ministry and service as individuals and as a body. We are freed to allow that grace to motivate us and fill us with energy to act.

Our faith takes shape and is made known to others as we practice sharing grace and working for justice in our daily lives. We are free to carry good news into our world. We are free to invite others to join us in profession of faith; to join us in serving our world; to share in making disciples as directed by our Lord.

May we claim our forgiveness. May we let go of the things that hold us back. May we dare to insist that the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the security and salvation of life with him. May we be unafraid to share our faith in all we do.

Amen.