

Behave to Build

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 19, 2026, by the Rev. Dr. LaTaunya Bynum.

Scriptures: Colossians 3.12-17

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Thank you for the invitation to be with you in worship this morning. I have always appreciated the hospitality and creativity of this congregation in the ways you open your beautiful building, from regional and community events. I am grateful for the kindness of your pastor. And I want to take this opportunity to say what you all know; that Jim Thomas is such a vital part of the life of this region and this congregation, that we are all grateful for the generosity with which he shares his gifts with us.

We are so grateful for you and the witness your congregation makes in this place. Through your support, in prayer, in showing up and participating in our life together, and through your financial support you, along with every congregation and ministry in the Christian Church in Northern California-Nevada are our partners in this important and life-changing work. And I have been grateful for the opportunity to walk with you as you strengthen your ministry here and throughout the region.

My sisters and I were not free-range children. Our parents needed to know where we were and who we were with, and they had an expectation that wherever we were, we would be on our best behavior. So, growing up, our parents' lessons about ethics, fair play, good manners, and situational awareness were summed up in one word: behave. It helped prepare us to carry ourselves with value for ourselves and others at home, school, or church. It was their way of reminding us that each of us represented all of us and so it was important that we offer the best we could wherever we were.

It is my practice when I preside at an ordination to present the new minister with a copy of the Disciples Ministerial Code of Ethics. I talk about covenant and connection as a way we hold each other accountable. And then I suggest that ministerial ethics are summed up in one word, behave.

To behave is to act in a certain way, or to act properly (though do we really know what properly means...is there a proper way to protest an unjust situation, or to support your favorite sports team, or to behave out of fear, or racist and misogynistic expectations? For those we may need to reframe what it means to behave because one more definition of behave is to act or react under certain circumstances.

Paul offers some suggestions on how to behave in a way that builds up God's beloved community.

They are suggestions we would do well to pay attention to because we know that these are days of political polarization, cultural fragmentation, fear, and economic inequality. We are too often siloed in tight information bubbles, where what we see and hear is interpreted and spun in very different ways. And we have for decades been distrustful of institutions, including the church.

Immigration policy seems to be without due process, and with cruelty and terror being the primary goal. We continue to watch in horror as masked ICE agents in unmarked cars, and no body cameras roam our streets. Last week during General Assembly we were reminded that with the attack on voting rights and representation, Jim Crow has left the museum escorted by six people in judicial robes.

We were also reminded that Jesus is not only a table flipper, but a table stretcher, and it is at that stretched table that we behave in ways to build up and strengthen one another.

How shall we dress as we come to the table? The question is not about what we will wear outwardly, but what attitude will we put on?

He has urged the Colossians and us to take off the former ways and put on new understandings so that while how we are embodied does not go away, we live in a way that says we know that we belong to Jesus Christ. Taking off and putting on are images of baptism by immersion.

“In the early church, baptism sometimes took place in the following way: After the candidate had prepared over a period of months, they would come forward for baptism, remove all their clothing, enter naked into the water, and be baptized into Jesus Christ. As they came out of the water, they would be dressed in a white robe” (Working Preacher, 12/29/2024).

Paul says that when we find new life in Christ, our behavior changes, and we make new connections. We are urged to put away, the stronger language is, “put to death” all that breaks human connection and community.

The list is long: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire (which is about exploitation, disrespect, and abuse); and greed (which is idolatry); anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language our words and speech. ⁹ Do not lie because, if we are baptized; if we are in a new relationship, we have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (v.5-10).

What then shall we wear? We put on some things that aren’t always comfortable to wear: compassion (mercy, to suffer with), kindness – like we have seen from so many of our sibling citizens during the World Cup tournament, humility, meekness or gentleness and patience – the ability to control our emotions in a way that helps strengthen the body of Christ.

We are invited to be tolerant, accepting, and forgiving, and none of those are always easy to do, because the hurtful behavior and the harm done to us and the people we love is real and we will have strong feelings about it. Paul invites us into the process of working through those feelings honestly so that forgiveness offered is authentic and reconciliation is possible.

We are invited to wear the love that puts the whole spiritual outfit together, to live in Christ’s peace and to live with gratitude that shows in all that we do.

We act to bear witness to we are in Christ Jesus. People are looking for character, integrity, and authenticity in Christians. When they see people claiming the name of Jesus behind the shield of Christian Nationalism or carrying the banner of racial and gender division...which is not the same as naming those evils, they will need hear and see a word, an authentic word about God from people who know that God is love, and that nothing will separate from the love of God (Romans 8.38-39). What is the positive difference Niles Discovery makes here? Build on that and live into the best of who we say we are.

Disciples say "We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." Our table is long and wide, and it expands to make room for all who want to join us. We are open and inclusive, partners with ministers, congregations, and ministries. We practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship, outreach and giving. And we proclaim that we are going to live and do justice.

And our siblings in the United Church of Christ have given us the words to help us hold ourselves accountable when we are have helped to fragment the community and then grow to help build the community. They have urged us to:

Be a blessing. Pray often.

Be kind. Give thanks.

Do good. Have courage.

Lead with love. Practice peace.

Be the light. Work for justice.

Encourage others. Be joyful.

That is the kind of behavior that connects us and builds up the community of Jesus Christ.

May it be so and may Jesus Christ be praised. Amen.