

Col. 3:12-17: Clothe yourselves in love

PRAYER:

First off, thanks to all of you for coming to church on the Sunday after Christmas. The new year is on us in about another day! Who all is excited? How do you feel about coming into this new year? So, let me ask a question: did anyone here get new clothes for Christmas? I remember when I was a kid, I hated getting clothes. To me, that meant the gift giver was not focused on the things in life that were really important, namely, toys. But as got older, I actually started enjoying getting clothes. Good hiking socks are a wonderful thing. But when it comes to more fitted things, like shirts and pants, I find I can only wear them if they are a good fit. And I do not buy clothes for others unless I know their size; otherwise, I know the clothes are not going to work.

Does anyone else here watch the 24-hour Christmas Story marathon on TBS every year? Do you remember the scene where Ralphie's aunt has sewn an outfit for him, and his mother makes him put it on? And then he trudges down the steps in ridiculous pink bunny pajamas? After he endures the humiliation of his brother laughing at him, and his father saying he looks like a "deranged Easter bunny," his mother tells him he can go and change out of them—with the caveat that he has to wear them when his aunt comes to visit. Do you ever find yourself in situations where you feel like you have to put on something—clothes, an attitude, a way of being—that you would rather not have to wear? How much more comfortable are you when you get to strip out of that and put on something that fits much better?

That is what our passage today speaks to. The author of this letter, who, if not Paul himself, is one of Paul's disciples and is drawing on his thinking, is, in a way, instructing the church at Colossae to take off their old, ill-fitting clothes. In other words, as those who are being made new in Christ, their old ways of being no longer fit for the lives of faith they are called to. And though the specific circumstances may have changed—the challenges at the church of Colossae are different from our own—that underlying message is the same. What we "put on" affects our relationship with God and

with one another. And because of who Jesus is, what he has done, and who we are in him, we can “put on” a way of being more in line with what Jesus has demonstrated to us.

The importance of clothing has quite a history in the Bible, going back to the very beginning. Who here remembers the very first thing human beings clothed themselves with in the book of Genesis? Yes—fig leaves! Do you remember why? It’s in the beginning of Chapter Three, if anyone wants to check. It was after Adam and Eve went against the direction of God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By eating from the tree, they are offered the opportunity to become “like God,” attempting to discern what is good and evil for themselves, rather than trusting in the guidance of God. And they take it. Once they have eaten that fruit, they make a shocking discovery—they’re naked! Now, they had been naked the whole time, but it is only after their “eyes are opened” that they suddenly care about it.

So what is their reaction to taking on this godlike responsibility of attempting to determine good and bad for themselves, and realizing themselves to be utterly exposed? According to the NRSV translation of Genesis 3:7, “they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” Our first human attempt to clothe ourselves comes as the result of shame and an attempt to cover ourselves up—to hide ourselves. From God! And of course it’s a complete failure. Have you seen what fig leaves look like? And almost immediately, when God enters the picture and Adam realizes he cannot hide, he turns the blame to Eve, and she to the serpent, and then we’ve gotten into the mess we’ve found ourselves in today.

And yet. Even back in Genesis, when we turned against God, God makes the first attempt to restore covenant. Adam and Eve sought to clothe themselves as a way of hiding their nakedness, of constructing a barrier. And they did a miserable job of it. So what does God do? We cannot go back to shameless nakedness; that door is closed. So God clothes them in garments of skins. God’s love for us is so great that God clothes us even as we fail to trust in him.

But what if the story had gone differently? What if, upon seeing the reality of our nakedness before God—our ultimate vulnerability—we had been able to construct different clothing than fig leaves? What if, when God confronted Adam, he had chosen to “clothe himself” instead in compassion for Eve? What if humankind had chosen humility, admitting they could not take on this task absent their trust in God—that fig leaves were not going to cut it? But that’s the trick. Because of that initial brokenness, our attempt to discern for ourselves, apart from God, we had to justify ourselves. We had to be right. We could not be vulnerable. We could not be honest.

But here we are in Colossians, and Paul (or someone writing in his name) tells the church: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” But how? How do we go from fig leaves and shame and hiding to these qualities of being? How has God made this possible?

In Colossians, the image of clothing is paired with the image of stripping away or putting off. Let’s go farther back into the letter to get some context on this. In 2:8, the author warns the church against being taken in by empty deceits according to human tradition, instead of according to Christ. Starting at verse nine, it goes on to say, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.” Moving ahead a little, the author goes on to stress that a physical circumcision, which was a necessary marker of Jewish identity, was no longer necessary for those who have come to this fullness in Christ. This is because, per verses 11 and 12, “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Now this is a bold statement. The author is stressing that no human tradition or action can take precedence over what God has done for us in Christ. Those who follow Jesus no longer need to undergo the ritual action of physical circumcision performed by human hands. This is because the necessary action has been initiated by God, working on us from the inside—a spiritual circumcision.

When we are baptized—buried with Christ—and raised with him, again, through God’s power, not through any action we can take on our own, the body of the flesh is put off. Now, I want to make clear that this verse is not saying that bodies are bad and the spirit is good, and we should practice stringent self-denial to gain spiritual superiority. In fact, the author of Colossians directly opposes the idea of asceticism; we do not need to engage in acts of extreme self-denial, because the “flesh,” meaning those things that keep us from living in the fullness of life in Christ, has already been put off. That is God’s gift to us in Jesus. It is because of Jesus that we can walk in the world wearing “fresh clothing.”

Moving back to chapter three, just before our passage for today, verses nine and ten read, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” Moving back to Adam and Eve, we see how our initial move away from God, attempting to hide ourselves with fig leaves, and pass on blame and abuse when faced with our own inadequacies—that old way of being is now stripped off through our renewal in Christ. Through him and in him, we can clothe ourselves with this new self, live our lives in a new way, oriented toward God in the way of Jesus.

Note that in our passage for today, there are specific instructions for actions we are to take. And later in the chapter, there are some instructions that have been used in abusive ways by those in authority who wish to maintain power over others, rather than living into the responsibilities of the new egalitarian community that Jesus calls us to. What I see as most important in this passage, though, is our new “clothing”—the new self that we take on—that guides every action we take. How and who we are in Christ guides everything that we do, because of who Jesus is and what he is doing through us, his body. Because of him, we can clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. This is what allows us to bear with and forgive one another. And above all, we are to clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Love is the surpassing message of Jesus, and the life he empowers us for.

There are two more points I want to touch on in the text. First, we do not live in this new way alone; and second, we do not just live this way toward those who think like us, look like us, and believe what we believe. The verb here is plural: “clothe yourselves,” NOT “clothe yourself.” We are not lonely individuals, striving to figure out this new way of being on our own. Through our baptism, our death with Christ, we are gathered into his body—it is only together, as the body of Christ, that we are able to live into this love he calls us to. And being humble with one another means none of us is “better;” we all have something to learn from one another, and different gifts to share. There is no distinction between race, gender, sexuality, class, or any other factor in that body; as verse 11 tells us, “Christ is all and in all!” And as his body, we can live this love because we trust in the power of God to raise us with Christ—just as God raised him from the dead. This is the God worthy of our love and trust, the one to whom, with gratitude in our hearts, we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

And this love is not closed off just to our little group. Christ’s death and resurrection changes the very nature of our world and ourselves. This is especially important to remember as we continue in the work of community engagement—of living the mission we are called to as God’s sent people. We are to be kind, patient, compassionate, and loving with all. In February, St. Luke’s will be facilitating a community conversation, in which we will listen to the hopes and dreams of the members of this community. They may share some things that are surprising, that are maybe not the first things we would think of when we put on the mindset of charity and being “helpers.” But we are to wear this clothing of humility—listening and responding to real needs so that we can be with others in the way of Jesus, rather than imposing our own preconceptions.

The start of a new year is a wonderful time to contemplate our old ways and continue to open ourselves to the Spirit of Christ, who initiates new ways of being within us. As we consider how we wish to start this new year, remember that we are not in any of this alone. The one who lives in and renews us is always with us, and we are with one another in him. The final verse of our passage this

morning sums it up well: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

BENEDICTION: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Amen.”