

## **Put On Christ**

Colossians 3:1-11

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 31) 2022

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There is an old fashion saying, “clothing makes the man,” which we might update as “clothing makes the person.” However we say it, it is getting at the notion that clothes change us. Change clothes and we are changed.

Now I know we are a little uncomfortable with that notion. We believe that it is what is on the inside that counts. Clothing is on the outside and can be changed but it is what is on the inside that does not change. “A rose by any other name is still a rose,” and that kind of thing. This morning I’d like for us to reconsider all that, and think about this from a different perspective.

When a judge, in the British legal tradition, renders judgement, the judge puts on, not only a robe, but also a wig. What does this special dress symbolize? It covers the individuality of the judge, signifying that the judge is making a judgment, not based on personal preference, but on the law’s demands. It symbolizes that the judge functions as an official of the state, a member of the larger system. It may also bolster the confidence of the judge, for it must be a humbling task to sit in judgement upon another human being.

The clothing makes the judge a judge.

At first, we were naked – naked and ashamed and afraid. The Bible contends that the first people made clothes from leaves (Genesis 3:7) to deal with our nakedness. But then God became a tailor and made for them clothes (Genesis 3:21) from animal skins. Their protective

clothing, made for them by God, was a sign of God's grace. It is interesting that the Hebrew word translated in Genesis 3 as "clothed them" is also the same Hebrew word as "forgave them."

You well remember the story of Joseph and his famous coat. That coat almost brought poor Joseph to grief, that coat, sign of his father's favor, that coat which was sign of Joseph's brothers' resentment (Genesis 37).

Jesus criticized a rich man who was dressed "In purple and costly linen" (Luke 16:19). Quite a contrast with the poor beggar Lazarus who lay outside of the gaze of the rich man. I Peter 3:3 ff. criticizes women who come to church dressed in fine jewelry and beautiful clothing.

To give someone clothing is to give something of yourself. So, Jonathan and David exchanged clothes, "As their own lives" (1 Samuel 18:1). Elijah gave his mantel to Elisha (I Kings 19:19-21). It was his way of him giving his whole authority by giving him his clothes (II Kings 2:12-14). With the clothes comes the power. Thus, the biblical writer can speak of the clothing of Jesus as having power. If the woman merely touched the hem of his garment (Luke 8:42-48, Mark 5:25-34, Matt. 9:19-22) she will be healed. Later, in the Book of Acts, if the sick touch the apostles' garments they are healed (Acts 19:12).

When prodigal son returns home, he is given the best clothing as a sign of his sonship (Luke 15:21). A robe, a ring, shoes, show forth to all that the son has all that the father has.

Jesus came upon a possessed man living in a cemetery outside of town. He was not wearing clothes and he could not and would not be restrained by chains. Jesus sets the man free from the Legion of demons, and the man, like the prodigal son, comes to himself. The story

says the townspeople found him fully clothed (Mark 5 and Luke 8).

Our clothes show forth our identity, our deepest personality, our commitments.

I'm saying, in this quick romp through some of the talk of clothes and clothing in the Bible, that clothing is not merely a covering, a utilitarian necessity. Clothing has to do with our reality. Take a person, put different clothes on her. It is as if the person changes. Clothes change a person, expand his or her existence. My clothing not only expresses who I am, but it forms who I am.

In the Bible, it is not so much that we change our hearts first, then we change our behavior, and it is not always that if we change our behavior then our hearts will change. Both things happen in the Bible. The Bible is not as worried as we are over which comes first, the Bible is interested in the fact of our changing, no matter which way it happens.

The lectionary has us reading this morning (I didn't choose this scripture) from the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians about the change that has been wrought in them through baptism. Paul is writing with all his might to help this small congregation survive in a hostile world. After chapters 1 and 2 of giving them the big picture, here in chapter 3, Paul gets straight with them. He tells them directly that they must throw away the old ways of their life. Get rid of sexual promiscuity, infidelity with desires focused on self-gratification and doing whatever they feel like at the moment. Then after this list of self-centered sexual desires, he adds greed. I think it is interesting that in talking about their old Roman imperial habits of sex, Paul adds economic sin. Paul says sex, understood as insatiable, self-centered sexual gratification, is a kind of greed. Then Paul quickly connects greed or covetousness with idolatry. Sexual sin here is not sin because it's about sex. It's sin because it is about greed, and greed is about idolatry – worshiping a false god who keeps tantalizing us with life and meaning

but only delivers death. Paul is saying this selfish, self-centered sin is toxic. It will kill your spirit, and will kill your relationships, and this same selfish, greedy exploitation is killing our planet. It's all connected.

Paul goes on to list anger, wrath, holding grudges, spreading gossip about one another, speaking to others using abusive speech, and lying. He says, "You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being tailor-made exactly to the specifications of the Creator. All your old clothes are out of date and out of fashion, but more, they are toxic.

During the height of Covid, I know doctors and nurses who would come home from the hospital and not enter their home before stopping by the washer and dryer out in the garage and strip off all of their scrubs and wash up. Then they would put on clean clothes and enter their house.

Paul says, you are putting on Christ and the segregation of Jew from Gentile, who's in from who's out, who's cool from who's not, who is free from who is a slave, straight people from gay, and all the rest of the old exclusions, no longer matter. The only thing that matters is defined by Christ. Everyone is included in Christ" (Col. 3:8-11).

For Paul, all the external labels by which the world pigeon-holes people, labels like "Jew," "Greek," "male," or "female," or "slave" no longer have meaning because they have now put on Christ (3:27). Over in Romans, Paul says, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14). To the Galatians, Paul wrote, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

In baptism, in a very dramatic, external, and public way, we go through the waters and the church says, “This person is now a Christian.” And the person baptized says, “I am now a Christian.” We know that at the moment of baptism the new Christian is not all he or she will be as a Christian, but we know they are on their way. This public, external declaration is important.

Years ago, in Clinical Pastoral Education, I heard a doctor say that the reason he wore scrubs, or a white lab coat was not only for hygiene, but also for encouragement. “If you are going into surgery to cut on another human being’s body, you need to be a doctor, even when you don’t feel like it. When I put on all this stuff, I’m a doctor, no matter how I feel about it.”

I think the doctor was on to something. Our American culture puts too much emphasis on how we feel, on inner attitudes, on psychological states, etc. I am not saying there is no such thing, I am simply saying our culture goes overboard on emphasizing that how we feel is the most important thing. Church is evaluated by how it makes us feel. We don’t do our work or chores or homework because we don’t feel like it. We drop out of church because our feelings were hurt, or we get mad.

I am no different than you are. I do not always feel like a pastor. I get tired, I get mad, I feel overwhelmed and inept, say the wrong thing when I should have said something else, run out of patience, run out of gas, etc. Some days I just don’t feel at all like going out and being a pastor. On some Sunday mornings I’d prefer to stay home and read a book.

So what happens? On Sunday mornings, I show up and put on my pulpit robe and stole, whether I feel like it or not. It’s not about how I feel on Sunday mornings. During the week I go ahead and get my Bible and go out and be a pastor. Sometimes you help me by reminding me that I am the pastor. Whether I feel like it or not, I go out and act like it.

My guess is that it is sometimes like that for you. You don't always feel like a Christian. You are unsure about what you believe. You are angry, you are tired, you are hurt, or you are confused. Well, you get up and put on your Sunday best, you come to church, you pray, you sing the hymns, you stand up and sit down, you say, "The Lord be with you." On and on you go through the worship service and sometimes, by the end of the service, you realize, "I *am* a Christian!" Sometimes, by the end of the service, you feel close to God.

It is an old truth that internal feelings are dependent upon external actions. We are here this morning because we have "put on Christ." The old human being is being transformed by the imposition of a new nature. There is good news here, grace. Our relationship with God is a matter of something that God has done before it is something we do for God. Being Christian has to do with God and not whether we feel like it or not. God, in Christ, puts his claim upon us in baptism, puts new clothes on us and we put away the old clothes and the old life.

This being Christian is very public. We may be accustomed to thinking of faith, belief, and religion as a private affair. But it is not. It is very public. It is public, external practices that may lead to private, internal commitment.

I heard a young man say, "When I put on this wedding ring, I had no idea what being faithful to another person meant. But after wearing this ring around for a while, and it begins to come to you. One day you wake up and you *are* faithful. Maybe fidelity begins with a willingness just to go out in public with a wedding ring!"

That is saying something important for something as small as a wedding ring. But Paul is saying the same thing about the waters of baptism. We are baptized to show publicly and externally to whom we now belong.

Anne Tyler's novel, *A Patchwork Planet*, tells the story of Barnaby Gaitlin who works for a company called "Rent-a-Back." If someone needs heavy work done around the house, cleaning out the attic, moving furniture, putting up Christmas decorations and trees, and so on, they can call on "Rent-a-Back." Elderly people make up most of the customers for Barnaby and his co-workers.

Barnaby is a young man with a troubled past. As a teenager, he was a thief. He was arrested for breaking into people's houses and stealing things. As a young man, he sees himself as a thief and his family sees him as the family failure. Here is how the book begins,

*I am a man you can trust, is how my customers view me. Or at least, I'm guessing it is. Why else would they hand me their house keys before they leave for vacation? Why else would they depend on me to clear their attics for them, heave their air conditioners into their windows every spring, lug their excess furniture to their basements? ... I could unlock the outside door so as to slip back in overnight and rummage through all she owns ... Not that I would. But she doesn't know that. She just assumes it. She takes it for granted that I'm a good person."*

Part of the story is how this young man is transformed by these people who expect him to be honest. They assume that since he is associated with this reputable company and that he does good work, that he must be good and honest. Their external expectations change him. He becomes trustworthy.

When we stand up and publicly commit ourselves to Christ in baptism, the rest of us, the church, expect the baptized to become like Christ. We trust each other to be faithful to Christ and to each other. We rely on one another. The church gives us the new clothing of Christ, it may not fit completely at first, we learn to grow into them. We are expected to start acting like Jesus, like a Christian. It takes practice and lots of trying on of Christ, but over time we become

whom we profess to be.

When I was a boy, like most kids I loved to dress up and play like. Even then hats were very important to me and to being who you were playing like. It was important not to mix hats and roles. Only wear a fireman's helmet when playing fireman, only a cowboy hat when playing cowboys. I remember how seriously I took the role for which I was dressed. If I put on an Army surplus helmet liner and my dad's old wool Ike jacket with the sleeves rolled up, I acted like a soldier. When I put on my baseball cap and picked up glove, I was not simply playing baseball, I became Brooks Robinson.

Piaget says, "Play is the serious business of childhood." Children dress up and play like adults because someday they will have to grow up and *become* adults.

Sunday mornings we come here and get all dressed up and act our way into a new way of being. Here we put on Christ, put on love, put on forgiveness, put on justice, put on peacemaking, put on healing and mercy... Here if we keep putting on Christ on Sundays, then perhaps we might actually *be* Christians on Monday through Saturday.

This morning, put on Christ. Perhaps the sleeves of forgiveness are a little long, but we will grow in them this week. Perhaps the hat of love and the shoes of grace do not fit us perfectly, yet. But they will.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all.  
Amen.