

What We Wear To Church

Colossians 3:12-17

The passage for today, Colossians 3:12-17, was read at our wedding. If it applies to marriage, it first applied to life together in Christ, Christian Community. I thought about extending the reading through the next verse, verse 18, which says “Wives submit yourselves to your husbands”, but I didn’t want to have the shortest marriage in history.

Paul said it better in Ephesians 5:21-2 when he begins “*submit yourselves to one another*, (for example) wives to your husbands.” Mutual submission is the foundation. In the 90’s the Southern Baptist convention wrote into their revised doctrinal statement, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, that wives should “graciously submit” to their husbands. I bet there was a lot of submission through gritted teeth in those days. One-way submission poisons marriages, communication and nations.

I

I entitled this sermon, “What We Wear to Church”. I’m not talking about ties and shorts. I’ve wondered when you were going to cut off one of my ties like you did to Doug. To forestall that, I graciously submitted one of my ties for your Season of Grace Banner.

One of Paul's favorite metaphors for the Christian life was the clothes we wear. He wasn't talking about *togas* but about *morals*, or virtues, or to use the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick's hymn, "Christ-like graces." That's what Christian virtues are: gifts of grace which make us more Chris-like.

As we become Christians we grow into the clothes he gives us to wear, and grow out of the clothes in our former life. There are clothes we put on and clothes we put away.

So Paul begins, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, put on..."

We are all chosen in Christ to be like Christ. Chosenness is not God's act for some but for all. And *holy*. Holiness means *set apart for God's purposes in the world*. Not perfection. Perfection is for the world to come when we will be made whole and all shall be well.

And *beloved*. The essential truth about us is that we are God's Beloved. We are all growing into what this means. Part of what this means in that we are not living under God's judgement but "under the mercy" of God. We arise every day, and live out the day, and go to sleep "Under the Mercy."

II

So here are our clothes: As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

Compassion begins with God's compassion for us, then our compassion for *ourselves*. Then our compassion for *others*. It was the hallmark of Jesus' life and the heart of his most famous parables, The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan. Let us not forget self-compassion. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron speaks of the spiritual virtue of self-compassion, *Maitre*, living compassionately with yourself.

And kindness, which seems in such short supply today. Henry James, the famous 19th century novelist told his nephew, "There are three important things in life. The first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; the third is to be kind.

And *humility*. Humility is not humiliation. It is the gentle acknowledgment of our humanity, our creatureliness. It comes from the word *humus*, soil. We all come from the dust. We are all morally near-sighted. God is God and we are not. Then there's the associated word *humor*. When we have real humility we can laugh at our common humanity.

In the mystery novels of Louise Penny, Inspector Gamash has four statements that lead to wisdom:

I do not know

I was wrong

I'm sorry

I need help

They all are expressions of humility. None of them require a Ph.D. Having a Ph.D. may make them harder to say.

And *meekness*. Gentleness may be a better translation, gentleness with self and gentleness with others.

And *patience*. It is living with a long view in mind. It is living with hope, hope that God is still at work, carving out a better future.

Then Paul talks about *forbearance* "bear with one another". It means we hang together through times of conflict, disagreement, and disappointment. Forbearance is an old fashioned word but it sustains marriages, communities and churches. We bear with, hold up, one another.

Many major denominations today are threatening to split up over issues of human sexuality, politics and doctrine.

Guess how many Protestant denominations there are in the world? 21,000! There is not much forbearance in Christ's church. It's easier to split and leave, taking pride in one's rightness and righteousness.

I remember hearing the Archbishop of Canterbury speak, pleading with the Anglican church not to split up over issues of women's ordination and homosexuality. He held up the Benedictine monastic "vow of stability". Not only does the monk take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, he also takes the vow of stability: that he will stay in that particular monastic community all his life, no matter what.

Our culture encourages us to cut and leave. The story is told of a man who happened upon a small deserted island. As he came to shore he was surprised to find one man there living alone.

He saw three huts and asked the man what they were for. "That first hut", the man said, "is where I live. The second hut is where I go to church." "Then what's the third hut for?" The man replied: That's where I *used* to go to church!"

"And forgive each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive." Marriages, communities, churches cannot be sustained without ongoing forgiveness. Nor can they thrive. Forgiveness forever flows from the heart of God, and then flows from us to others. Forgiveness, one has said, is giving up trying to make the past different. It cannot be changed, only forgiven.

III

Above all, Paul says, put on *love*.

There is love as *delight*, delighting in one another.

There is love as *friendship*, described by Judith Viorst as “comforting and exuberant, sacred and miraculous connection.”

There is love as *reverence*. Such love honors the differences, uniqueness, otherness of the other. *The Holy Spirit makes us one, not identical*. Such love celebrates what chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sachs calls “The dignity of difference.”

Then there is love the New Testament calls *agape*. This is the love that gives and gives and doesn’t count the cost, the love that forgives and forgives and never stops forgiving. It is the love made plain for us in Jesus who touched the sick with healing hands, befriended tax-collectors and sinners and washed disciples’ feet, a love poured out for us on the cross. Such love is not a simple human possibility. It is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (Romans 5:5)

Such love is broader than love in marriage and in community. It is our calling in society. A Good Samaritan kind of love.

Love on a larger scale means mercy and justice. It cares about immigrant children separated from their parents at the border. It is outraged when the first 7 verses of Romans 13 are manipulated to defend such action in the name of “law and order”. Those verses have been used all through history to prop up

oppressive regimes and defend institutions like slavery. We should have read the next verse in Romans 13. Verse 8 says: “The one who loves has fulfilled the law.”

Love has a social dimension called mercy and justice, and when we put on such love we seek to make our community, nation and world better.

IV

Such love, love and its accompanying virtues—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness—are cultivated and nurtured in Christian community. They are being formed in us as we are being formed by Christ.

Here is where the word of Christ dwells in us richly. I do not think we are fully aware of how much we are being formed by the words of Jesus which circulate through the air in church.

Here is where we teach one another and learn from one another

Here is where we learn gratitude and how to live thankful lives.

Here is where we sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs to the Lord. We are being formed as we sing the faith, our hearts beating with God’s own heart.

And here is where we learn to do what Paul says at the end of the text:

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is his name above all names which forms us, deeper than family or nation or race. Deeper than Smith or Jones, American, Democrat or Republican, black, white or Baptist, *his* name.

Conclusion

I've told you the Will Campbell story of Grandma Betty Sue who was given a plaid, flannel bathrobe for Christmas and was so proud of it she wore it to church. Walked down to her first pew and sat down in her new bathrobe. Her daughter-in-law was scandalized and told her so. She replied, "Just hush, it's the prettiest thing I've ever seen and the Lord deserves the best.

She was right. The Lord deserves the best, the best that we can think, act and live. But we should note that the bathrobe was a gift, and so are the clothes Christ gives us when we come to church, from shoes to hat:

Compassion

Kindness

Humility

Gentleness

Patience

Forbearance

Forgiveness

And Love.

Here, I'll help you on with your coat, if you'll help me on with mine.