

New Clothing

Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12-17

Did you get any new clothing for Christmas? As a boy I hated when my parents gave me clothes. Now, I plan to use a gift card I got yesterday to—yes—buy clothes. But “clothing” in our passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians has a metaphorical meaning. Writing to a church plagued with misunderstandings of Jesus' divine nature—and riven with conflict over the issues—Paul has two purposes in writing: to correct the incorrect teaching, and to urge the Colossian Christians to pull together, not apart. Our passage belongs to the latter part of the letter, which urges unity.

Many, many a preacher has urged his or her congregation to unify. Perhaps rather fewer of us preachers have advised those churches about **how** to unify. Yet Paul laid it out, right here in Colossians 3. He starts with the command to put on a new spiritual attitude. To describe this new attitude he uses a series of words that have a soft connotation—in our day and time, and in his. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. These have been more associated which stereotypically feminine attributes and as such, seen as weak. **Nothing could be further from the truth.** Female or male it takes strength to be all these things. It takes self-control. It takes maturity and toughness.

A long time ago in a church far, far away a controversy arose over the popularity

of one of the spiritual retreat programs. (The Banquet, Cursillo and Emmaus Walks are all examples of these programs.) Many people in that congregation had participated in these weekend-long events. For the record, I think they can be terrific, though they can also cause what I am about to describe. Some of those who had participated began to speak disparagingly of the spiritual lives of those who had not. They felt the program had given them a deeper relationship with God. People who had not gone through it could not possibly know Jesus like they knew Jesus. This situation may seem trivial; it was anything but. I knew of at least one marriage that felt the strain. A church parking lot conversation between long-time friends ended with one of them shouting, "Get off my back!".

The pastor's wife, (not Linda), who had gone on a program retreat, a normally reserved, quiet woman, decided to address the situation. She requested a spot on the next session agenda. In advance she told her husband and all the elders what she intended to do with her time. She started by reading this passage from Colossians. She then closed her Bible, looked at the elders, and said something to the effect of, "If we who have gone on this weekend retreat really want to become spiritual leaders, we have to do what this says. It says we have to wrap ourselves in love, 'which binds everything together in perfect harmony.'" Then she fell silent and just looked around the table, into the eyes of any who would look back. Her moral authority in that moment was absolute. And every person there knew how hard it was for her to do such a thing. It took strength, not weakness, spiritual strength.

Did things immediately turn around in that church? Did all gossiping cease? Did all conflict disappear? Of course not. The real world does not operate like that. As sinners we cannot help sinning. Sometimes it seems as though all our behavior is rooted in fear and insecurity. We mistreat others because we fear how they might mistreat us, or we are angry for how we feel they have mistreated us. To all of which Paul says, "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Find the strength to wear that new clothing, that new attitude of love and peace. When we do we can make progress, we can grow in spirit and unity, as individuals and as the Body of Christ.

The fact that Paul wrote these words to a church does not limit their application to churches. These new clothes can bring healing to families. The same goes for boards of not-for-profits, work crews, sports teams, legislative bodies, national cultures. In truth, Paul's words tap into one of the deepest, most powerful forces available to mortals. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," he continues. Listen to what God is saying to you, to God's word, which comes to us primarily through the Bible but also in prayer and in conversation with our brothers and sisters in the church. Let God's word dwell in you *richly*. Seek it. Nurture it. Heed it. We must be willing to do the work of allowing God to make it happen within and between us.

For a contemporary and hot example of how we can put on these new clothes we need look no farther than the bridges of our noses. Does putting on a mask actually afford any protection against the spread of the virus? I imagine the collective heart rate of the church just went up. "Oh, he's going there." Yes I am, because if the

word of God cannot guide us through the hard cases it lacks the power we claim for it. Mask wearing immediately became yet another visible way to identify the tribes in American society. No matter which tribe you belong to, every trip in public “exposes” you to people who belong to the other. And just as surely as certain head covers instantly enable gang members to identify members of rival gangs, masks—or the lack thereof—instantly enable us to make reasonable guesses about the tribal affiliation of every person we see. And so often judgment follows straightaway.

For the record, I belong to the “masks ***might*** prevent the spread of COVID to a certain degree, and they signal to others that I’m trying to care, so I am willing to wear one” tribe. (In passing let us note not all signaling is problematic.) So, how does the word of God apply to this case? Paul tells us to “put on” compassion and patience, among other things. If wearing a mask protects the customer in line in front of us, say a person with asthma, out of compassion for them we ought to wear a dangd mask. And we ought also to pray hard for patience as we enter our 21st month of social distancing. As people of God, we have the calling of growing into that spiritual maturity which empowers us to defer to the needs of others. In that same spirit, please hear me when I say that I do not judge people who choose not to wear masks. Truly I do not. ***I do not know what has led them to their choice. I do not know where they get their information and I am not smart enough to know better.***

Please hear me say also that I do not mean to claim I possess an exemplary spirit. I mean only to try to illustrate how the words of Paul, which form part of the

word of God, apply to real life. I will freely confess that there is another choice that people frequently make, with visible consequences, that I struggle not to condemn. I, too, am a sinner. Which is why you and I need to let the word of God dwell richly within us. Like that congregation that experienced friction over what ought to have been the positive injection of a new spirit through widespread participation in spiritual programs, we all need to guard against presuming we hold the high ground.

Paul concludes this passage with, “whatever you do...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” We will conclude with these very words. **Whatever** we do, we must do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Whether debating public health policies, sharing Christmas meals with extended family, conducting business, or **whatever**, we must consider ourselves ambassadors for Christ. We bear his name. Let us act accordingly. Put on those new clothes. Find the strength to put others ahead of ourselves. Let peace rule our hearts.