

CLOTHES MAKE THE CHRISTIAN

Carlos E. Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17

***“Above all, clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”***

Colossians 3:14

Well, have the ugly Christmas sweaters gone back into the box yet? How about the ties, with Christmas trees on them? You can still get away with wearing them a little longer, you know — because it’s still Christmas until this Saturday, the last of the twelve days of Christmas.

More than any other holiday — except, perhaps, Halloween, which is its own special case — Christmas seems to be associated with special clothing. Sure, there is the proverbial Easter bonnet — if you’ve got daughters of a certain age, the temptation to get them all frilled up for an Easter parade can be overwhelming — but there’s nothing about that clothing that says “Easter” the way one of those colorful sweaters with snowflakes or Santa screams out: “Christmas!”

Maybe those Christmas sweaters and ties are the faint, modern echo of a very ancient practice: the “festal robe.” You can read about those things in the Bible. They tended to be loose-hanging garments of plain, white linen. They weren’t the sort of thing a Jewish man would wear every day: because, in a dry and

dusty country with an agricultural economy, anything white wouldn't stay white for long.

Besides, the whole idea of putting on a fresh garment was not something that matched most people's everyday experience. Clothing back then was handmade, so most people owned only one change of clothes — maybe two if they were well-off. The overflowing, walk-in clothes closets of today were not part of anyone's experience (except, perhaps, the king or queen).

Considering how precious clothing was, in biblical times, the fact that there was such a thing as a festal robe at all demonstrates just how important religious ceremonies were to the Jewish people. For a man to pull on such a garment of brilliant white was to demonstrate that, on this feast day, he wasn't heading out into the fields. He was going to make for the Temple, instead, where he'd join his fellow believers — each of whom was also decked out in dazzling white.

You can glimpse the persistence of this custom in the modern Middle East if you've ever seen photos of Muslim men engaging in the hajj — that sacred pilgrimage to Mecca that each faithful Muslim man is supposed to make at least one time in his life. They say that, if you board a plane for Saudi Arabia at the time of the hajj, you'll be struck by how many male passengers are dressed alike, in those flowing white robes. It's said to be a great democratizer: because you have

no way of knowing which of those men in the airplane seat is a brain surgeon, or a general, or a janitor. When they're on the hajj, Muslim men consider themselves equal in the eyes of Allah.

When they reach their holy city, it all culminates in a grand procession around the Ka'aba, that black stone cube of a building, that contains within it a small, black boulder of unspeakably ancient vintage. (Some think it's a fragment of a meteorite that fell to earth, thousands of years before there even was a prophet Muhammad.) National Geographic once ran an article on the hajj that captures the drama of that climactic moment, as thousands of men, clad identically in white, process around the shrine again and again. It was one of those long-exposure photos, snapped from high up on a nearby tower. The individual robes of the pilgrims blend together into a white, donut-shaped blur — as each man merges his identity into the surging sea of his fellow pilgrims. I'm sure it's a sight to behold.

Maybe the ancient Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem was like that. Who's to say? — because it's been a couple thousand years since the Romans destroyed the Temple, and with it the Jewish pilgrimage tradition.

We've got festal garments in our culture, of course — how else to explain the bride's wedding dress, or the groom's tuxedo? These are not everyday wear.

You'd never see a lacy white, flowing gown like that in any other context. And, unless the man's used to attending charity galas or sitting in a box at the opera, he may never wear a tuxedo again in his life.

That's the point of a festal garment. It's not for everyday use. It's dedicated to a sacred purpose.

So, when we turn to today's New Testament lesson, and hear Paul telling the Colossians, "**As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,**" he's probably got something like a festal garment on his mind. To "put on" virtues like compassion, kindness or humility is obviously not something superficial. It's not just for show. You can't make virtues like these part of who you are without deep devotion to God, from whom those virtues spring. When you pull on that kind of spiritual garment, you're serious about transforming your entire life into one that emulates Jesus Christ.

This passage in Colossians isn't the only place Paul adopts this metaphor of putting something on. In Galatians 3:27, that famous verse, he teaches: "**As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves *with Christ.***" He goes on from there to proclaim: "**There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one**

in Christ Jesus.”

Pulling on that kind of garment is so much more than just lightheartedly donning a snowman sweater before a holiday party, or putting on a team t-shirt before sitting down to watch the big game. This is about *transformation*! Put on the Lord Jesus Christ — allow the power of his Holy Spirit to transform your life — and you become *a new creation*.

That’s what Paul’s getting at in another passage, Ephesians 4:22-24, as he writes:

“You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Put on that sort of spiritual garment — and, here, we’re obviously talking about more than just some pieces of fabric sewn together — and your life will never be the same again!

Paul says much the same thing back in Colossians, in a passage just before the one we read together today, as he’s addressing the importance of always telling the truth:

“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. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”

There you have it, yet again. Put on the festal garment of Jesus Christ, and it's so much more than just a person pulling on a costume. It's more like a holy garment that — once you don it — conforms you to God's expectations of how all who wear this robe are to live.

Many of those who wear some kind of uniform in their daily work report a similar sort of experience. Police officers, for example, have their distinctive uniforms: a suit of clothing all others are prohibited, by law, from wearing. A great many officers regard the uniform with a sort of reverence — a potent symbol of the role they take on for the good of society. It's a role that requires them to put aside their individual preferences and desires, at least while they're on duty, and concentrate on one task: upholding the law.

It's only a small part of the uniform, but consider the importance of a sheriff's badge, in so many movie Westerns. Like the famous *High Noon*, for example. At the beginning of that movie, Will Kane — played by Gary Cooper —

has just turned in his sheriff's badge. His plan is to get married and move on to some other occupation. But then, word comes that an outlaw named Frank Miller, whom Will locked up years before, is now out of prison. He and his gang are on their way to town and angling for revenge: not only on the sheriff who arrested him, but on the whole community.

You can see Will's struggle as he decides what to do about that badge he's so recently unpinned from his shirt. He could leave it off, remaining a private citizen. It would be so easy to hitch a team of horses to a buggy and ride off with his new bride, leaving the townspeople to their own devices. Or, he could pin on the sheriff's badge once more, becoming, in the eyes of his neighbors (and especially those of the outlaws), the living representative of the law in those parts.

The sheriff's badge in *High Noon* is no mere decorative accessory. To the extent that we can think of it as a garment, it's the sort of thing a person puts on that transforms him or her into a different sort of person.

There's an odd little short story by the British writer, Max Beerbohm. It's called "The Happy Hypocrite." The main character is a notoriously self-centered individual, who's got the marvelously appropriate name of Lord George Hell.

Lord Hell seems, well, hellbound in his desire to live as dissolute and sinful

a life as ever he can. As the story opens, he's a wreck of a man. Anyone who looks upon his face can see the scars and furrows of years of hard living. At mid-life, he's lost all his youthful vigor. His face is blotchy and bloated from years of overindulgence.

But then, the miraculous happens. Lord Hell falls head-over-heels in love with a beautiful young woman. This is no mere physical desire on his part, but a high and holy — and very genuine — affection. There's something about this virtuous young woman that makes him want to live a righteous life, for a change. Yet, there's a great sadness in the nobleman's heart, because he knows that, with *his* abysmal reputation, his beloved would never have him for a husband.

There's an element of magic to this story. George Hell puts on the mask of a saint, to hide his sinner's face. It's such a miraculous mask that, once it's put on, no one can tell by looking at him that this is not his real face. As far as anyone knows, he is a kind and virtuous man.

He courts the young woman and he marries her. They live happily together.

That is, until a certain woman shows up from George's past. For whatever reason, she's not fooled by the mask. She knows the man underneath it (or thinks she does). One day, in the presence of George's new wife, she confronts him and cruelly tears off his mask, expecting to reveal the bloated, pockmarked face of an

old degenerate.

Here's where the magic comes in. What she reveals is something quite different. Behind the mask of a saint, there is no longer the face of a terrible sinner. George's own face has become transformed by the power of love. He has become a true saint — and all by wearing that magical mask!

Paul continues, in that Colossians reading: **“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”** Love is that way, you know. It's transformative. As you and I set out to practice love by being more loving, it happens in time that we become more lovable as well.

It's all too easy, in life, to fall into the shame game: as we try to convince ourselves we're such miserable sinners, there's no health in us. As for redemption — true redemption and thoroughgoing transformation — that seems impossible. People don't change! The ponderous weight of the past — our failures and regrets — conspires to weigh us down whenever we undertake the journey of Christian discipleship.

The good news of our faith, my friends, is that it's *not* impossible. Quite the contrary, this sort of transformation happens all the time, among those who follow Christ. It's not instantaneous. It takes time. But it does happen — and often.

“Clothes make the man,” they used to say. I don't know about that, but I do

know a similar statement is absolutely true: “Clothes make the Christian” — at least, when the garments we’re seeking to put on are fruits of the Spirit such as Paul mentions in Colossians: “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience... and, above all... love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Here we stand, on the threshold of a New Year. It’s a time when the thoughts of many of us turn to self-improvement. We want to be better in 2019. We really do. Yet, if we’re like most people who make New Year’s resolutions, we bite off way more than we can chew, by way of behaviors we mean to change.

I think the key to success, in the resolution business, lies in taking small bites. Make the resolutions small and manageable, and you’ll have much greater chance of success. Don’t undertake to change your whole person, by sheer force of will. None of us are any good at that sort of thorough transformation. That’s God’s department.

Just resolve to put a few new behaviors on, as though they were articles of clothing. Try them on for size. As you do so, know that you’re like a child, stepping into your parents’ shoes that are way too big. It won’t be a behavior you can own, as coming from within, for a very long time. It will seem ill-fitting, even uncomfortable, at first. Just know that, as a child grows into adulthood, if you give

this Christian discipleship thing a chance, you too will grow into it, in time.

That's the power of the Holy Spirit to transform. May you know it in your life in abundance, in this New Year!

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