

Clothed With Christ

A Sermon on Luke 3:21-22 by Rich Holmes

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Years ago, when I was living in South Carolina, I was invited to preach at this church down the street from where I lived while the regular pastor was on vacation. This church called me up and said "Would you mind preaching for us on this Sunday, while our pastor's away?"

I said "I'd be glad to, let me put it on my calendar" and they said "Ok, we'll see you then."

So the Sunday came when I was to preach and I arrived ahead of time, and somebody was there to meet me at the door. He showed me the bulletin and it looked like any other Presbyterian bulletin I'd ever seen, there were a few hymns, there was a Prayer of Confession, there was a sermon and after the sermon there was the Apostle's Creed. Now, the words of the creed weren't printed in the bulletin, but that was okay, I had said it a thousand times before. I could say it in my sleep. Well, so I got up to lead the service and everything was smooth sailing, everything went great. We sang some hymns, we went through the prayer of confession, I preached a sermon and the congregation seemed to be paying attention to my every word. We were now in the fourth quarter, the service was almost over, but then we got to the part where the congregation was to stand up and say the Apostle's Creed. I froze. I completely froze. Even though I could say it in my sleep, as I stood there with a hundred pairs of eyes fixed on me, for the life of me I couldn't remember how it started. I stood there staring back at the congregation for five seconds and then five seconds became ten seconds, ten seconds became twenty seconds, and all this time I knew if I could just remember how it started I would be fine. Twenty seconds became thirty seconds, and finally the words popped into my head "I believe." And then I lead the congregation into saying "I believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven

and earth." Well, I thought that was a complete disaster. I thought I ruined worship, and I would never be invited back. But believe it or not, on the way out the door that day about a half a dozen people said to me "Reverend, we just love the way you paused so dramatically like that before you said the Apostle's Creed. Where'd you learn to do that?"

Well, I got away with that one, but you know I have to admit something to you, it really drives me nuts, it bothers me so much whenever I make a mistake in church and I've made many. But you never get used to it—and I don't quite know why that is, but I suppose it is because I think of worship as high drama, and in the midst of high drama when you make a mistake because you forget the Apostle's Creed or you spill the communion wine or you trip over your robe, it just sort of ruins things, doesn't it? It kills the moment, doesn't it?

And that is sort of what is going on today, or at least it *seems* to be in the story we have of Jesus' baptism. We only get the short version of the story in the gospel of Luke, the gospel of Luke doesn't tell us much of anything about Jesus' baptism, but the longer version of the story goes like this. John the Baptist is standing in the Jordan River, and preaching to people about one who is coming after him, preaching about one who is coming after him, the thong of whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. And then, as if out of thin air, the one whom he is preaching about, the one he is baptizing people for and preparing the way for suddenly appears. You can almost see the clouds part, and a ray of sunlight come down on him like a single spotlight falls on the lead actor on a darkened stage, and you can almost hear a choir of ten thousand angels start to sing, but then Jesus comes down into the cool waters of the Jordan, to be baptized by John and John whispers to him "um....you're supposed to be baptizing me, I am not supposed

to be baptizing you.” It seems like spilling the communion wine, tripping on your robe, it seems like a big mistake in the midst of this high drama.

It seems like a mistake, because Jesus is not supposed to be baptized, he is supposed to be the baptizer. People are lining up on the banks of the Jordan to be baptized to have their sins washed away, but what sin does Jesus have to wash away, what does he possibly have to be sorry for? And if he didn’t have anything to be sorry for, then why on earth was he baptized?

In a wonderful book titled *The Patron Saint of Liars*, the author Ann Patchett tells the story of Rose Clinton and her daughter Cecilia who live at Saint Elizabeth’s Home for Unwed Mothers in Habit, Kentucky. Rose is the cook at Saint Elizabeth’s and Cecilia is her fifteen year old daughter. One day, a girl named Lorraine comes to the home to be interviewed by Mother Corrine, the nun in charge of the home. Cecilia decides to give Lorraine some helpful advice as she prepares for the interview.

“The guy who got you pregnant, don’t say he’s dead. Everybody does that. It makes Mother Corrine crazy.”

Lorraine is quiet for a minute. “I was going to say that.”

“See?”

“So what do I tell her?”

“I don’t know,” Cecilia says. “Tell her the truth. Or tell her you don’t remember.”

“What did *you* tell her?” Lorraine asks.

Cecilia is stunned. “I sat there absolutely frozen,” she would later remember. “I felt like I had just been mistaken for some escaped mass murderer. I felt like I was going to be sick...no

one had ever, ever mistaken me for one of them, not even as a joke. The lobby felt small and airless. I thought I was going to pass out."

Why would Cecilia say such things? Why would she react this way? It wasn't that she disliked the girls who came to live in St. Elizabeth's. They were her friends and she wanted to help them. She may have even loved them. But she was a good girl and she was horrified at the prospect of being mistaken for one of these so-called bad girls, one of these so-called bad girls who got pregnant outside of the bonds of matrimony, one of these bad girls who wouldn't be fit to wear a white dress on the day when they stood at the altar.

And so often, I wonder if we are not that way in the church. So often, I think we want to help people in the church who are the so-called bad people as we tell them that they are welcome to come here and worship and even fellowship with us so long as everyone understands who we are and understands who they are and understands that we are not them.

But then we see Jesus on the day of his baptism—standing with a crowd all of whom want to be baptized to show that they are repenting of their sins. All of them want to be baptized to show that they are ashamed of the kinds of choices they have made in their lives—and we know the kind of people they are. They are the first century version of pimps, meth addicts, people with three and four DUIs, small time crooks. Jesus himself doesn't have anything to repent of. How can someone who is perfect have something to repent of? But he isn't afraid to be identified with such people. He isn't afraid to be confused with such people. He isn't afraid to take on their shame and to know their shame so that he might know our shame.

When I was an undergraduate in college, the state penitentiary was about three miles down the street from where the university stood. It has long since been closed and the building

has been torn down, and all the inmates moved to another prison in another part of the state. Back then, I was also taking a class on philosophy and criminal justice, and so as a part of this class we took a field trip to go visit that penitentiary that was right down the street. It was an experience I'll never forget because we didn't just get to visit with the prison inmates between a wall of glass and over a telephone the way you see it in the movies, we actually got to sit down with them and shake hands with them and talk to them face to face. Well, one day our professor Jerry Wallulis told us about this trip and I think we were all both excited and a little nervous about the whole thing. We had lots of questions as you can probably imagine. We wanted to know, what will these prisoners do to us when we're there? Will they try to kill us, or harm us in some way? Will they be just like anyone else, what will they do? Well, I remember Professor Wallulis eased all those different kinds of worries. But the week before we went on our field trip, I can remember that he did warn us about one thing. He said "When we go to the prison next week, you women can wear whatever you like. But men, make sure that none of you wear jeans. Men can wear shorts or sweats, or even slacks but no jeans, because the prisoners wear jeans and if you wear jeans the guards might mistake you for one of the prisoners. If you are a guy and you wear jeans you might just find yourself getting stuck inside the prison at the end of the field trip." Now I felt sure that at the state penitentiary they had a better system than that for identifying who was a prisoner and who wasn't, but you can bet that on the following Tuesday not one of us guys was found wearing jeans, we would have cut off our own legs before we would be found wearing jeans.

What Jesus shows us in the event of his baptism is that his life is about being so devoted to the love of sinners that he wears these prison jeans. He is not afraid to be confused with them.

It is often said that the role of Christians is to hate the sin but love the sinner, but what is often forgotten I think is that in hating the sin and loving the sinner, shouldn't we so love the sinner that people might even think we love the sin? Shouldn't we love the sinner so much that it might just ruin our reputations?

If that is right, if that is what you think we should do, then as we remember what our baptisms in Christ are about, I think we should consider the fact that when we are baptized into Christ, we are invited to put on these prison jeans as well. There is an ancient tradition in the church in which the newly baptized person into Christ puts on new clothes. In fact, in Galatians Paul says that whoever has been baptized into Christ has clothed himself with Christ. I have often wondered what kind of clothes you would wear if you were clothed with Christ. Would you wear a robe like this one, would you wear lots of crosses, would you wear something dazzling white to symbolize holiness and purity? If we pay attention to the story of Jesus' baptism, then I think the answer is whatever clothes which would cause others to confuse us with the very people in this world who are considered the real sinners of this world, the very people in this world who are looked on as the lowest of the low in this world.

Lest anyone misunderstand me, I am not suggesting that we should be confused with the lowest of the low because we would do all the things that they would do, far from it. I am not saying that we should be confused with violent criminals by ourselves becoming violent criminals, prostitutes by becoming prostitutes ourselves or drug dealers by becoming drug dealers ourselves. But I am saying that we have no right to claim to love sinners unless we know who they are and what their lives are like, and we cannot know what their lives are like unless at some point we are bound to be confused with them in our ministry to them.

One of the problems with Christianity in the modern age, is that the cross for us is no longer an instrument of death. As a society, it is clearly a good thing that we don't crucify people, but for our faith it is a problem that in this day and age the cross is nothing more than a religious symbol. And unless you grew up in the church, you don't know, or you usually don't know what on earth crosses were used for. So maybe instead of having a cross as our symbol, we should have an electric chair or a gas chamber, or a gurney. The people that we execute in this society or in any society are those which that society thinks of as the worst of sinners, as the lowest of the low. And I don't think we fully grasp Christianity until we know what the people back in the first and second century who shook their heads in disbelief at Christians for worshipping a crucified savior were really saying. When they went around saying "Do you Christians really worship a crucified savior?" what they were really asking was "Do you Christians really worship someone who was executed, who got the electric chair, or who got the gas chamber, or who got lethal injection?" Imagine how confusing that must have been. "Just what did this Jesus do that you worship? Just what kind of person was he?"

Within our two churches of Calvary and Northminster, what if we were to be so devoted to loving our neighbor, that we forgot to ask what would happen if we ended up being confused with our neighbor? What if we were so devoted to loving sinners that we forgot to ask what if we end up being confused with those sinners? Were we to do that, I think we would see some consequences of that kind of living. It would hurt our reputations. It would hurt our reputations considerably among the decent, honorable people of society. But then and only then would we be putting on those prison jeans and being clothed with Christ. Then, and only then would we

understand why Jesus stood in those waters of Jordan to be baptized, to be baptized when he himself had nothing to be forgiven for.