

Getting Some New Clothes

Colossians 3:1-14, John 11:38-44

As much as the kids probably don't want me to say it, there's only one week left before school starts again. Did I hear a few cheers from the parents? Of course, I know some children are ready to get back, they want to see their friends, they want to get involved in all of the activities. One thing that used to be a given when I was growing up, was the beginning of the school year also meant getting some new clothes. Not that we had a lot of money to buy a whole new wardrobe, but maybe some new sneakers, a new shirt or pair of pants. And at least for the first day of school, I had on something new. I guess there is something special about getting some new clothes.

Every once and a while, Joanna and I will look into our closets (usually around rummage sale time) and say: "I think we need some new clothes." And usually nothing happens. Because neither of us are big clothes shoppers...and it seems like most of the things Joanna buys, she eventually returns. And I probably keep things too long....but hey, you never know when that necktie will come back in style. I did finally get rid of my plaid pants and green jacket from the 70's.

There was a book written by John Molloy called Dress for Success. It became the fashion guidebook for many people trying to climb the corporate ladder. The subtitle on the book: The #1 book to make you look like a million so you can make a million. Molloy's advice centered on a basic premise – always dress like your boss.

Well, everyday, we all have to decide what to wear...for work, for school, for recreation. And for some people having the right look or wearing the latest fashion is very important. This morning I want to us to consider another type of wardrobe. Clothing that is connected to our spiritual lives. For any of us who claim to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is spiritual apparel that has far greater significance than any clothes we may buy in a store or online.

This is the picture we have in today's reading from the book of Colossians. An important message about our spiritual clothing. In the early church, one of the powerful symbols of finding new life in Jesus Christ was demonstrated in putting on a new garment. The new believer would be baptized, and to symbolize one's new found faith, sometimes the person was asked to get rid of their old clothes and put on a new robe. The old clothes represented the former life...now in Christ everything has become new. Baptism was an expression and a

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witness that the old ways are past, and I am seeking to live a new life, with new behaviors and actions.

So it makes sense to read this passage as removing the old garments and putting on the new. Verse 9: “seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self...” Listen to the things we are to take off: Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. What an appropriate word for the world we live in. The tensions between nations. The violence so evident, the words of hate and abuse, the prevalence of racism and sexism, the oppression and mistreatment of people. We may say that’s not me, that’s for people who are visibly making trouble and strife. But we know we are all sinners, and we are capable of harboring evil thoughts, and mistreating and hurting others with our words and our actions. Isn’t it interesting that it is in our baptism ritual two of the questions that is asked addresses their very issue: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? These are the things that are part of the world and we are conditioned and taught to accept as the way of life. But we are called to live a different life. That part of our claim as followers of Christ is to get rid of those things that part of the world’s agenda and to take on a new character as we follow the Lord.

Just like the one question asks us, it may require repentance on our part. Whether we have carried them out so that others see it in us, or whether it has become part of our secret thoughts, these are the things God is calling us to get rid of.

In the Old Testament, when one of the leaders of the people of Israel, or one of the prophets felt remorse for the ways they had sinned against God, they would tear their garments, they would cover themselves with ashes...They would do this as a sign of their repentance, their mourning over their sins. I wonder today, if there is some clothing you need to get rid of...some things that have not been pleasing to God...and we bring them before the Lord, asking for God’s forgiveness and seeking to make some changes that reflect a more Christlike spirit. Sometimes we hear the word repentance and we only think of it in negative terms...we think of God’s judgment on us. But I think of the words of Jesus who called people to repentance...his words were: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the good news.” Repent,

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and believe in the Good news. We may often think of repentance as judgment and condemnation for our sins, but we discover that when we repent, we find ourselves connected with the good news of God's love, grace and forgiveness. It is getting hold of the truth of why Jesus came into the world. So it is opening ourselves to God and to experience God speaking to our hearts.

You see for each of us, repentance requires some soul searching, some inner examination...to really focus on those things God wants of us. Paying attention to that is what the apostle Paul is talking about in this third chapter of Colossians: "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above...set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. One translation says: "Set your affections on things that are above..." The Message paraphrases it with these words: "So if you're serious about living this resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going around Christ – that's where the action is. See things from his perspective."

It is a call to a different way of looking at things, a different way of living.

It is a call to that "Gaze of the Soul" we talked about when we looked at Tozer's book, The Pursuit of God. He called it "a continuous gaze of the heart...a directing of the heart's attention to Jesus. It is lifting the mind to behold the Lamb of God."

So what is this new way of living going to look like? Well, just like there are the things we must take off, so now we are to put on some new clothes. Just take a look at God's dress code for us: "As His chosen people, we are to clothe ourselves with kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Now that's a different kind of clothing list. He goes on to say that we are to have a spirit of forgiveness about us and then he summarizes it all by saying: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." These are the new clothes we are to wear. This is what we should be seen wearing. What a difference we would see in our communities and in our world, if those who claim the name of Jesus will let these Christlike qualities be a genuine part of us.

Picture with me that powerful scene in the Gospel of John...the death of Lazarus in John 11. It had been such a mournful scene people gathered at the tomb expressing their grief. And then Jesus appears and

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calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb. This dead man comes out still wrapped in his grave clothes, but Jesus has given him his life again and sets him free from the clothes of the grave. It is what the Lord can do for us...take those grave clothes of our past and give us some new clothes to wear. Take those things that have bound us and set us free.

One of the lessons shared with the children at VBS this year was on day 2. It was simply this: God's love changes us. We look at the world around us, with its negativity, with its hatred, with its bullying and mistreatment of people and injustices. And we must challenge those systems and speak against those evils, but we must also look at ourselves, that God would do a work in our own hearts, knowing that God's grace which is greater than all our sin is able to transform us and make us the instruments of peace and good news and channels of God's love.

Let us humble ourselves before the Lord, let us get rid of those things that hinder our faith or contribute to the world's point of view. Have you ever put on something new and you were hoping people might notice your new outfit, or dress, or shirt? What about your spiritual attire? What will people notice about you? Will people notice the life of Christ in you by the spiritual clothes you wear? We have the opportunity to let Christ do his work in our hearts and lives. And like the closing hymn speaks so beautifully, we depend on Jesus' blood and righteousness and we can be dressed in his righteousness alone, not of my own doing, but Christ working in us, changing us.

I invite you this morning to put on some new clothes, your new life in Christ, to put on that new way of thinking about your relationship with God. And to see how those new clothes will change how relate to one another and to all of God's children.