

**"Clothes to Keep"**  
**Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**December 27, 2009**  
**Text: Colossians 3:12-17**  
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All of us have gotten clothes for Christmas we have had to return for some reason. They may have been the wrong size. Some simply weren't the style we wear. Some were so downright ugly that immediately upon receiving them, we hung them in the back of the closet until our next garage sale and then earnestly prayed that the person who gave us those clothes wouldn't show up. Maybe that's why gift cards have become so popular. They are a much safer bet than to purchase actual articles of clothing for someone else.

The writer of Colossians mentions clothes here. Putting on new clothes after taking off old ones is a metaphor utilized often by the Apostle Paul and his followers to describe what it means to experience the new life in Christ. There is archeological evidence that the imagery of taking off old clothes and putting on new ones may have originated in the early Pauline churches from a part of the baptismal ritual. Those persons being baptized would wear their old clothes until it came time to be baptized. Then they would remove those clothes, receive their baptism, and be given new clothes. This practice

symbolized that their old selves had died, and they had become a new creation in Christ.

The writer of Colossians, most likely a student of Paul and part of the Pauline "school," begins the passage with an acknowledgment. Those of us who have been baptized and professed faith in Christ are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. What is stated here is very close to what the voice from heaven proclaims as Jesus himself is baptized. So through faith in Christ, we become to God as Jesus is to him. We are God's beloved adopted children, made holy through the death of his only begotten Son, Jesus.

With that status comes appropriate clothes to wear. We can't get away with wearing what we have been wearing. That's not the style of dress that is fitting for a follower of Christ. It seems there is a Christian dress code. Only certain clothing will do. Metaphorically speaking, we are given new clothes at our confirmation, and these are clothes to keep. These aren't like some of the clothes we sometimes have gotten at Christmas. These are not clothes we want to return to the store and exchange for something more suitable. These are not clothes that go in the back of the closet for any reason. These are to be our favorite clothes, the ones we would choose to wear every day.

If we wanted to carry the metaphor of clothing a bit further, we might say that a major part of what makes these clothes so special and

so attractive is the threads out of which they are woven. The material that goes into these clothes is multi-colored, and each rich and vibrant shade of thread represents a character trait that is to be demonstrated in the life of each and every follower of Christ.

There is the thread of **compassion**. As you know, to have compassion is literally to "suffer with." It is to feel the pain of others and to be willing to help them bear the burden of that pain. To be compassionate is to be on the side of those going through difficulties of one kind or another. It is to be there for them when they need a committed friend.

There is the thread of **kindness**. Perhaps one of the reasons we love Christmas so much is that we sense that other people, as well as ourselves, work a little harder during this season to be kind. Greetings of kindness, whether it is "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays," are exchanged freely and easily. It just seems to come naturally. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could keep up that level of kindness throughout the year? And we should strive to be kind to everyone we meet, whether they are kind to us or not and whether we consider them to be "our kind" of people or not.

Woven into the fabric of the special clothes we are to be wearing as Christians, clothes to keep, is the thread of **humility**. When we are humble, we are a lot less prone to be looking down on anyone and a lot

less likely to be judgmental toward others. And when we are humble, we are not overly prideful. Even in the church I have witnessed the inappropriateness of the actions demonstrated by people who have too much pride or are driven by egotistical desires. The humble person is always other-serving rather than self-serving. True humility keeps us well-grounded enough that we can feel realistically good about ourselves with a healthy self-esteem so that we can act with integrity.

There is the thread of **meekness** apparent as well. To be meek means not always having to be in charge or in control. Meekness is exhibited by the person who doesn't need to have things done his or her way all the time and also doesn't have to be right all the time. The meek person is sensitive to the feelings of others, so that person knows how to treat people with the appropriate amount of gentleness. The meek person respects other people's boundaries.

**Patience** is a thread in the fabric of the clothes to keep as Christians. When we are patient, we can allow things to happen over time. We understand that in many cases there is a process that needs to take place. Patient people are not always in such a hurry. Speed is not always of highest value in a situation. Some things just take time. As patient people, we realize that God's timetable may be much slower than ours.

The clothes to keep, the clothes we as Christians are to start wearing immediately upon our acceptance of Christ as our Savior and Lord, include the thread of **grace**. It takes grace to "bear with one another," as the writer of Colossians urges Christ's disciples to do. It is the grace of letting people be who they are. It is the grace of having only realistic expectations of others. It is the grace of being willing to cut family members, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and fellow church members a great deal of slack. It means not being too hard on other people. It means treating others as we want to be treated ourselves.

In order to bear with one another graciously, we have to be forgiving. **Forgiveness** is yet another thread. To forgive is to let go. We don't allow ourselves the pleasure of playing the "remember the time" game. Remember the time you forgot to do this. Remember the time when you inappropriately or insensitively said this. Remember the time you hurt my feelings by doing this. Remember the time when you made this mistake. The world may play that game, but in the church, we don't get to. We are to forgive the trespasses of others as God has forgiven ours.

Christian clothes, clothes to keep, are made of a fabric that has **thanksgiving** and **gratitude** woven into it. Our hearts are to be grateful and thankful in all our circumstances. If our hearts are

indeed full of appreciation for life's blessings, there can't help but be a song in our hearts. Our hearts will sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs to God in praise for all of the gifts and graces he has bestowed on us.

And it is not surprising at all to be told by the writer of this epistle, himself greatly influenced by Paul, that **love** is the thread that pulls all of the other threads together. Love is the tie that binds, that provides the fabric with its shape and texture and that gives the clothing the alluring quality it has to make a wonderful impression on all those who have the chance to see us wearing these clothes.

When we put on these beautiful clothes, after having taken our old ones off, people we meet are going to want to know where in the world we found such a stunning outfit, perfectly suitable for every occasion and always flattering to the one who is wearing it. These are clothes that never, ever wear out or go out of style. They always make a fashion statement. They are always in demand. They truly are clothes to keep.

The love that is the thread above all threads, the golden strand as it were, comes as a direct result of Christlikeness, following the model in word and deed or the one who loved us so much that he was willing to die for us. All we think, say, and do is in Jesus' name and for his sake. And Christlikeness comes as a direct result of allowing the word of the Lord to dwell in us richly through learning and through the

encouragement of the community of faith, the church. We help each other put these clothes on and keep them on. All of us are fashionistas to one another in that respect.

And what is the payoff for us as the church if we wear these clothes like a uniform? What benefit is there for us if these clothes become our exclusive attire? Not much. Just the peace of Christ and perfect harmony, that's all. Just the church being of one body, that's all. Just the church being what it has been called by God to be., that's all. Just the church living up to its mission in the world, that's all.

Think about it. If we actually were to wear these clothes every day, what a Christmas present that would be to a world desperately in need of peace and harmony. What a Christmas present that would be to our own hearts and minds individually and to our fellowship together as a community of faith. And all we have to do to make this a reality is to put on and keep on a new and beautiful set of clothes? So what are we waiting for? What do you say we get dressed?