

January 3, 2010
Colossians 3:12-17
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Dressed for the Journey

Over the years I have noticed that when people who don't know me very well, but have seen me in worship, encounter me in other contexts, they're not quite sure who I am. They give me a puzzled look. Then when it registers, more than once I've had people say, "Oh, I didn't recognize you without your clothes." Then they get all flustered, "Oh, I didn't mean it that way." The blue jeans that are my casual attire somehow just don't match with the clergy robe.

Clothes are an interesting part of human experience. Certain clothes, or uniforms, tell us about a person's professional responsibilities function – a lab coat, a judicial robe, a company's logo shirt, a clergy robe. Other clothes can often indicate what part of the country someone lives in – a three piece suit versus dress flip flops. Clothing often indicates religious affiliation. Head pieces in particular are common – yarmulke from Jewish tradition, burqa or hijab from Islamic tradition, head turbans for Sikhs, prayer coverings and bonnets for Amish women, etc.

Clothes of course keep us warm, which we're very grateful for today. Yet, they are also a form of self-expression, which often creates tension between parents and children, especially in the teenage years. But that self expression begins early. Over the holidays, we were reminiscing with our young adult daughters about how when they were young, one of the insisted on wearing her, I think three, sundresses all year one year. Nothing else would do. Thankfully we were living in California at the time. The other liked to mix many bright patterns and colors at the same time – often wearing two different socks. One day I had to bite my tongue when she came out of her room with about four different bright patterns on, ready for preschool as she announced. I carefully asked, "Do you like what you're wearing?" With a big grin, she replied, "Oh yes." I swallowed my adult objections and let her go. There were many smiles on adult faces that day as we entered the classroom.

We've just gone through a season of special clothes. We've dressed up for the holidays – with our special Christmas sweaters or our costumes for the Christmas pageant. But now that the season draws to a close, what shall we wear? On Wednesday we begin the church season of Epiphany – the season where we focus on Christ being revealed to the world. What does this season call for?

Howard Thurman put it this way,

*When the song of the angels is stilled when the star in the sky is gone
when the kings and princes are home when the shepherds are back with their
flocks*

*the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost
to heal the broken
to feed the hungry
to release the prisoner
to rebuild the nations
to bring peace among the people
to make music in the heart.*

This work of Christmas calls for another kind of clothing – the kind that Paul speaks of in the letter to the Colossians – the spirit’s garb.

As God’s people, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

Paul’s use of the metaphor of clothes is especially meaningful to the Colossians, whose city is a textile center and known for producing a particularly fine wool called *colossinus*.

The Colossians are a people who pride themselves on fine clothing. On the surface, they look great. But all that glitters is not gold. They are also a community of people who are finding it hard to live together. They have a reputation for trouble.

Paul implies that they have been trying to “dress themselves up as Christians,” but it’s not fooling him. They may be saying that they have on “The Christian’s New Clothes,” but it’s more like “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” There is really nothing of substance there.

For the work of Christmas we need the spirit’s garb. We need to slow down and carefully clothe ourselves with the garments of the Spirit. Intentionally, thoughtfully, and with compassion for our own difficulties, we should dress ourselves for the ongoing journey of faith.

To help us do that today, I’m going to read the lesson again. This time more slowly. This time from a contemporary translation called *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. I’m going to leave a few seconds between each sentence to let it sink in. Then we’ll move into our quiet time in preparation for receiving the gifts of communion.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ – the Message – have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives – words, actions, whatever – be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God...every step of the way.

