

June 18, 2017
Colossians 3:12-17
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

Garments of Grace

*(This service is in celebration of Ray Cornils,
Minister of Music, who is retiring.)*

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

After a very cool spring, we are finally getting out summer clothes. This is the season of flip flops, graduation outfits, wedding attire, and beachwear, although I suspect few of us will be at the beach in the coming week. Although this is a time of changing attire, today's scripture reading reminds us that the garments that really matter are the spiritual clothing in which we wrap ourselves.

This is an important passage to have beside when we listen to the news each day. But I chose it because I think it expresses Ray's spiritual commitments.

SERMON

There are times when clothing sparks our imaginations and our memories. Today I'm going to mention three items in Ray's wardrobe – a costume, a tuxedo, and a shirt- each of which illuminates a spiritual commitment in his life that connects to this month's UCC General Synod – love of children, love of neighbor, love of creation.

Let's start with the costume. I remember my first Christmas pageant here. With the aid of special clothing, we had right before our eyes – sheep, shepherds, angels, magi, and a camel. Mandy Normand Similien, who is now on staff, remembers singing in one of the first Christmas pageants when Ray came to First Parish. How many people here today have been part of a Christmas pageant with Ray over the last 30 years?

The costume that made the deepest impression on me, my first Christmas here, was the one that Ray was wearing. He was dressed as a shepherd. It wasn't the costume itself that was so important. It was the fact that he was wearing one. It was clear that Ray was not simply directing the children; he was **with** them in the story. His outer attire gave witness to his inner commitments to compassion, humility, and patience.

Love of Children is one of the themes at the General Synod later this month. Over 30 years Ray has shared with us in the baptism of countless children, where we promise to love, support and care for those being baptized.

Ray, we are grateful for the ways you have acted on those baptismal promises. You have blessed our children with your love for music, your developmentally appropriate methods in interacting with them, and your patience with their participation in other activities which sometimes meant missing choir practice. Over the years you have helped hundreds of children's souls sing. When I first came some of the youth told me they had been singing with you since they were four years old. What a blessing for the children and for you, to share the spiritual journey together all these years!

As we put away the shepherd costume each year, I am mindful of the words of Howard Thurman,

*When the song of the angels is stilled
and the star in the sky is gone....*

The work of Christmas begins,

Thurman goes on to list ways to serve our neighbor and his list ends with...

To make music in the heart.

Ray, you have helped us love our neighbor by inviting us all to make music in our hearts and in our communities. We are grateful not only for your leadership in worship, week in and week out (over 1,500 services) but also for spring concerts, summer organ concerts, handbell concerts, and ecumenical lessons and carols that we share with the wider community. And that doesn't count all the ways you also share music in the community through the Kotschmar organization and teaching at Bowdoin and USM.

Another item in Ray's wardrobe that relates to this part of his ministry is the tuxedo he wore for spring concerts. Remember *St. Matthew's Passion* here on Good Friday in 2011? It was a deeply moving experience, requiring countless hours of preparation, practice, and prayer.

Ray doesn't just lead people in singing. He invites them to engage the score fully – explore the meaning of the text, practice vocal skills, and prepare prayerfully to make music in the heart.

Over the years, as Ray has encouraged and challenged adult choirs to engage the score in front of them, they have often found themselves singing and ringing beyond their capabilities. Their collective voice has been greater than the sum of the individuals.

So how many people here today have sung in one of the choirs (children or adult) or played in the Parish Ringers handbell choir directed by Ray?

But really, aren't we all in Ray's choir? As a staff, we appreciate that Ray doesn't just sing with us; he prays with us, discerns with us, studies with us, crafts worship with us, and invites us all to engage the music so that we may deepen spiritually. Tuesday mornings are a joy, as the staff plans worship and attends to the overall life of the congregation. Ray has been an integral part of that work and ministry.

Ray has spent the last month transitioning from Pilgrim House office to home office, making decisions about what stays for the music ministry at church, what goes home and what is "permanently retired" to the circular file. The physical practice of clearing out is part of the spiritual practice of release that is embedded in retiring. Ray has been releasing his role as we have been releasing him.

At the end of the service today, with deep gratitude for the ministry we have shared, we will formally release Ray from his role as Minister of Music. This transition is a reminder to all of us that Ray has a life outside of First Parish. Yes, really, he does. As a symbol of Ray's personal life, I think of the Ecuadorean shirts that he and David wore at their wedding here four years ago this month. Happy Anniversary! And congratulations on both your retirements.

Ray loves creation. He loves life itself. He and David have been loving their corner of creation in Woolwich for 30 years now and exploring Ecuador over the last decade. And traveling back and forth with them are their miniature dachshunds - Abby and Miles.

Ray, as we remember a shepherd's costume, a formal tuxedo, and an Ecuadorean shirt, we are grateful for your garments of grace – your compassion, humility, and patience. Your integrity of faith and practice. Today we celebrate and give thanks that you have been **with** us as a companion on the Way.

One more thing– your organ shoes. I've heard people wonder if those shoes have wings? Not only do they fly across the pedals of the organ, but also, they seem to help you float down the aisle and soar up the stairs as you make your way from loft to chancel and back again. How do you do it?

Thanks for everything!