

The Message for Sunday, August 1, 2010

Title: “Known By What you Wear”

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-11

I. He looked different... In my last year of undergraduate school, my college devised a new semester system. Instead of quarters, they switched to a term-interim-term system. The month of January was dedicated to the study of one subject. I had a friend named Robbie who took the month of January, in 1969, and traveled to Rome and Athens in order to study ancient architecture.

Today, that does not sound like a big deal because I did the same thing just a couple of years ago when I traveled to Turkey. But in 1969, that was a big deal. And yet, Robbie’s parents could afford it; so he made the trip. After studying in Greece, he flew to Rome. When he got there, he discovered that the airline had lost his luggage. Again, that is not as big a deal today as it was forty-one years ago. Today, at least based on my experience two summers ago in Turkey, the average student travels with a couple of pair of jeans, some t-shirts and some gym shoes or sandals. But in 1969, a month’s travel would have required a lot of clothes.

We all wore khakis, button down collars, and Weejuns. And, we all had fairly nice coats. So, when the airline lost Robbie’s luggage, Robbie found himself without practically every stitch of winter clothing he owned. There he was in Rome, and forced to buy an all-new wardrobe. Again, that would be no big deal today because there is an international sense of fashion—at least from my perspective. When I have gone shopping in Rome or Paris, I have seen shirts, pants and shoes that are basically similar to what I might find at Belks, Dillards, or Macys. But in 1969, there was a world of difference in what was stylish in Rome and what was acceptable on an American college campus in the south.

To cut to the chase, as it were, Robbie came back dressed like a European. His clothes stood out, especially his shoes, as being completely different from the rest of us—dramatically different. But, as we soon noticed: It was the same ole Robbie!

II. What Paul said... What made me think back over forty years to that obscure event was something Paul said in his letter to the Church at Colossae. Using a metaphor Paul frequently used in speaking to congregations, Paul described the new person in Christ as having put on a new self in the same way someone would put on new clothes. (See Romans 13:14; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:5-14)

Paul first said that if we have been raised with Christ then we are to seek the things that are above—where Christ is. If we seek the things above, then we are to discard the things that we once did. In fact, Paul says it pretty strongly. He said to “put these things to death.” However, I need to say that the term is not quite as grisly as it sounds. In the original Greek, it does not mean to murder someone. It simply has the meaning of “allowing something to die.”

Paul, therefore, said we should allow to die the base desires, things like: Fornication, impure living, the evil passions of wrongful desire and greed. Later, he adds things like: Anger, malice, wrath, slander, abusive language, and especially lying.

When we invite Christ into our lives, that is like “putting on Christ.” And, in order to put on Christ, we have to make some changes. In Paul’s metaphor, putting on Christ first requires taking off some things. Only then can renewal truly take place.

III. Putting off and putting on... The first thing I want to say about that is this. One of the reasons I remember Robbie’s lost luggage is because all of his new clothes looked truly funny. Robbie was not any different, but he surely looked different. However, there is another reason I remember Robbie’s wardrobe misfortune.

The previous December (1968), when the dorms let out for Christmas break, someone stole almost all of my clothes. Trying to be efficient, I had hung them on a rod in the back seat of my car on the night before I had to be out of the dorm. ‘Efficient... but incredibly naïve. The next morning, I discovered that thieves had broken into the car and had stolen everything except a couple of shirts.

I will never forget my pulse quickening and the sick, hollow sensation I felt when I came down to the parking lot and saw a vacant back seat. I did not know what I was going to do. Almost all of my hang-up clothes were gone! I was a youth director at a nearby church, and I still had some church activities that had to be handled. What was I going to wear? I had the clothes I was wearing, plus what I had packed in the trunk. I could be careful and get by for a couple of days; but then, it was clear I was going to have to buy a new wardrobe.

I have always liked new clothes; and I still try to dress nicely. But, the prospect of having to replace all of those clothes at once was overwhelming. Who was going to pay for them? I finally got around to thinking of insurance; and even though my father was my insurance agent, the whole process was daunting.

Now, I mention this story because I think that this is the way many people think when faced with the possibility of putting on Christ. It is a challenging experience to face having a complete change of wardrobe. As exciting as it is to come into a relationship with Christ, it means change. The really big question for most people involves how to handle that change?

I recently read of a study that indicates people are as prone to procrastinate when it comes to pleasurable things as they are to put off unpleasant things. (Drake Bennett, “The Perfect Vacation,” *The Week*, July 16, pp. 40-41; originally published in *The Boston Globe*, © by *The New York Times Co.*)

Have you ever had to get rid of a favorite pair of shoes? The soles may be worn, the uppers may be cracked, and the heels nearly gone, but you like the shoes. You know you need another pair, but you find that it is hard to part with them. You are going to get new shoes; but think of the trouble. You may be fortunate enough to get them over the internet, but I have never had any luck buying new shoes any other way than going to the store and trying them on. And, wow, do new leather shoes set you back a few denarii!

As great as it sounds, putting off your old life and putting on Christ is a awesome task; but it is not done without some effort, some serious thought, and some personal cost. It is o.k. to feel a little intimidation. But, think of how great it is going to be.

IV. New clothes for the soul... That leads me to the second thing I want to say. For many people, getting new clothes makes us feel better. We can not wait to wear our new shirt to work, our new shoes to church, our new shorts on the beach (not me!), or our new hat on the golf course.

Today, I am likely to get new shirts all throughout the year. And, when we go on vacation, we always supplement our wardrobe with new stuff. But, when I was growing up, we only got new clothes a couple of times a year. One was in the Fall when we started back to school. Another was in the Spring, just before Easter.

Did you ever wonder why people buy new clothes for Easter? In the 4th Century, A. D., when Emperor Constantine had recently converted to Christianity, he issued an official decree that his court were all to wear their absolute finest at Easter. Eventually, the people in the church who had worn the same clothes or at least shabby clothes for Lent discarded old frocks for new ones. After the Puritans took control of the Western Church, celebrations at Christmas and Easter were frowned on. But, following the Civil War in America, the idea of new clothes for Easter took on renewed interest. (http://blogs.fashionclub.com/my_weblog/2010/03/new-clothes-for-easter-a-history-of-the-tradition.html)

New clothes were a symbol of re-dressing one's self in Christ. And, with the re-dressing one's self in Christ comes the feeling of having new "duds." (That word comes from Middle English in the 16th Century, A.D. [dudde], meaning clothing or personal items.) I remember getting back from some of my extreme adventures in Turkey. After some of those adventures I got so dirty that I wondered if the laundry would get out the dirt. On several occasions, they could not, and I had to throw away the clothes I had worn (as on the Jeep safari I enjoyed in the Taurus Mountains).

I might be hungry and exceptionally thirsty; but the first thing on my mind was getting cleaned up and putting on clean clothes. Those clean clothes made me feel restored, decent, and presentable. Putting on Christ should have that effect on our souls. Putting on Christ restores us; it makes us feel decent and clean again; it is the new self Paul encourages for all who want to follow Christ.

V. Sunday Christians... And that leads me to the third thing I want to say. In 1837, Hans Christian Anderson's third volume of *Fairy Tales for Children* was published. In that collection along with "The Little Mermaid," there was a story entitled, "The Emperor's New Clothes" ("Kejserens nye Klæder," *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn. Første Samling. Tredie Hefte*, published by C. A. Reitzel, 7 April 1837). That was one of my favorite stories when I was a child.

The story is about scam artists who wanted to take advantage of the Emperor, whom we would call, today, a "fashionista." And so, they pretended to be weavers and promised the Emperor a suit of clothes from a fabric so extraordinary that it could only be seen by the most able and competent people.

Truthfully, the Emperor could not see the fabric; but, he pretended to admire it because he did not want to appear inept himself. For the same reason, all the court attendants also said they saw the cloth.

When the scam artists said that the suit was finished, they pretended to dress the Emperor and then marched him in front of his subjects. From the crowd a small child's voice could be heard. It is one of those funny little ironies of life that the smaller a child, the louder—and more honest—the voice. The child said, "He's wearing nothing at all!"

Hans Christian Anderson wrote the story as a satire on the snobbery and hypocrisy he found in the social circles of Denmark. But, the story is an excellent example of those who want to pretend that they had exchanged their earthly clothing for the new clothes of Christ. They are sometimes known as "Sunday Christians."

There are all kinds of Sunday Christians. Some of them go to church. They like to be seen and heard, not only in church but also at mission projects, and church events. But at home, they are anything but clothed in Christ. They beat up on spouses, step out on them, ignore their children, cheat on their taxes and kick the dog. Jesus had a similar problem with Pharisees.

And then, there is kind of variation on the Sunday Christian, except they do not go to a church. When asked, they say that they can not find a church they like; or they do not like the hypocrisy they claim to find at churches; or they appear to have put on a Christian wardrobe that is just a little better than most Christians they meet.

And so, they are content to deliver judgments on others who do not quite measure up. They are not wearing the new self from putting on Christ.

VI. Expectations... And this is the last thing I want to say. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Probably every new and eagerly expected garment ever put on since clothes came in fell a trifle short of the wearer's expectation." (Charles Dickens, from *Great Expectations*, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/clothes.htm>)

I grew up with a friend who used to buy very nice clothes; but once he put them on, he looked as though he had slept in them. His shirt tail was always out, and his trousers were always wrinkled. Even after putting on Christ, we are not going to wear Him with perfection. Even though renewed by His presence, we are still prone to sin. Our lives will become wrinkled, maybe soiled, and sometimes even appear out of style. But, that ought not stop us from putting on Christ. We are known by what we wear: So put on Christ. Amen.

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