

Pastor's Message – 12/26/2021
Colossians 3:12-17

More than any other holiday -- except, perhaps, Halloween, which is its own special case -- Christmas is associated with special clothes. Sure, some people parade around in colorful spring outfits for Easter, but there's nothing about that clothing that says "Easter" the way one of those colorful sweaters with snowflakes or reindeer screams out: "Christmas!"

Is anyone wearing their ugly Christmas sweater today? I'm thinking probably very few, if any, are wearing their ugly Christmas sweaters right now. We tend to clothe ourselves differently for Sunday worship.

That being said, we do clothe ourselves in a more festive way around Christmas. I'm wearing a pair of my Christmas socks today. We wear special colors. We clothe our houses with Christmas decorations. Some of us even clothe our vehicles with reindeer antlers and a red nose. Those things identify us as people who are observing and celebrating Christmas.

There are ways that people can be identified as Christians. In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul lays out some of those ways. Paul says, "Clothe yourselves." That may not seem very revolutionary to us, people of the overflowing walk-in clothes closet. Merely to change one's clothes is not a big deal. Is there any person today who'd buy a new house that didn't have walk-in closets ranging in size from 100 to 150 square feet? If you buy a pre-1940s house, you're lucky to find a closet in your room at all. People just didn't have that many changes of clothes, and then, too, a lot of kids wore "hand-me-downs."

But, in the ancient world of the early Christians, putting on a fresh set of clothing *was* a big deal. Clothing was costly. There were no factories to manufacture it. Every article of clothing had to be painstakingly stitched together by hand. Few people outside of the aristocracy owned more than one or two changes of clothes.

To receive a new outfit, therefore, seemed like making a whole new beginning. And for Paul's readers to hear him saying, "Hey, you need a new wardrobe!" -- well, they would sit up and listen, because changing clothes was just not something you did without thinking.

Christians give thought to how they look to others and the "clothes" they are wearing. In our reading from his Letter today, he gives us five pieces of clothing, listed in verse 12, that are all designed to communicate Christ to others and pay attention to their interests and needs. *Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* are virtues that we should have on us at all times, whether we're out shopping or at Church or school or work or walking through the neighborhood. Wearing this kind of *character clothing* demonstrates to the world that we're not about us, not putting ourselves first, but putting Christ and others first: loving God and loving others.

Compassion is sympathy for the situations of others. We never really know, we can never truly understand, what someone else might be going through. There is an old Native American proverb about walking a mile in another's moccasins.

Kindness is the active consideration for others and their needs. Think of it as *compassion taking action*. Rather than categorize people by their dress and behavior, we look for ways to care for them where they are. We represent Jesus, whose kindness drew people to him rather than pushing them away.

Humility helps us to see others as more important than ourselves. This is an important theme for the apostle Paul:

- With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2);
- Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves (Philippians 2:3);
- [Do] not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. (Romans 12:3).

And the apostle James adds, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13).

Gentleness involves courtesy and consideration for others, waiving our rights to personal gain in order to lift up the other. Gentleness doesn't mean weak. Gentleness really

means *strength under control*. The Greek word referred to a wild horse tamed or medicine that could tame a fever."

Patience is the ability to not become frustrated and angry when others intrude on us, but, instead, offer forgiveness for their shortcomings. After all, Paul says, we ourselves have tested the patience of God with our own sin. So, "just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive" (v. 13).

And then there's *love*. All of these virtuous pieces of character clothing are vitally important for the Christian traveler, but the one piece of clothing that goes over them all like a warm overcoat is love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (v. 14).

But how do we do that? How do we maintain this wardrobe in a world where people tend to dress their lives in ways that are hostile or tempting or offensive?

Paul says, "Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. (v. 15). "Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives." Some people read the Upper Room or another devotional everyday or have a Bible of the Day verse delivered to your email box. In that way, Bible verses become a daily earworm, guiding our thoughts and actions.

"And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks to God* the Father through him" (v. 17, emphasis added). Let whatever you wear express your gratitude to God for his blessings. You might wear an ugly sweater for Christmas, but we must always put on Christ, reflecting his place in our lives by our words, deeds, and acts of love.

But last, we express praise and gratitude. We worship, "Sing[ing] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts." It's purely coincidence, because our system of chapters and verses for the books of the Bible was not created until centuries after they were written, but that's not the only 3:16 that is significant.. We're all aware of John 3:16, of course. Later on, when you get home, I invite you to thumb through your New Testament and look up the number in other books.

Right now, let's focus on Colossians 3:16, where Paul invites believers to ""Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts." To do that, I want to give you the opportunity to sing the Christmas carols we have not yet sung this year in a hymn sing. This is one of the toughest things that a Church musician has to do, so we will practice Paul's encouragement with patience, kindness, and love.