

A New Wardrobe

9th Sunday after Pentecost – August 1, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Colossians 3:1-14

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! ¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Today, the Lectionary takes us to a passage from Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae, a small city in Asia Minor. Paul urges us to clothe ourselves with our new self!

"The Emperor's New Clothes" was one of my favorite Hans Christian Anderson stories. There was, of course, the juvenile fascination with nakedness, but I also think that I was intrigued by the story's several morals. As you may recall, the Emperor was a vain man whose only ambition was to dress well. His vanity led him to fall for a transparent con and his new clothes turned out to be no clothes at all! In today's passage from Colossians, Paul urges us to don a new wardrobe that is fitting for those who have been raised to life with Christ. Rather than exposing our nakedness, this wardrobe renews us in the image of our Creator.

Old clothes, new clothes

A list of vices and a list of virtues. We are to set aside the one and embrace the other. We are to "put to death" the vices, the sins, that separate us from God and "set our minds on things above."

"So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above . . ."

Regrettably, the NRSV is somewhat misleading in its translation of Colossians 3:1. Paul is not expressing any doubts about the status of the Colossians nor is he speaking to a mixed group, i.e., some Christians and some not. Paul's Greek would be better translated as "If, as is the case, you have been . . ." or "Since you have been . . ." Paul is reminding the Colossians that *all* Christians have been "raised with Christ." But what does Paul mean by "raised with Christ"?

Earlier in the letter, Paul speaks of Christians as having died with Christ (2:20). But we, of course, have neither *physically* died, nor have we been *physically* raised (resurrected). We can understand Paul only when we truly grasp that there is a non-physical reality, the things that are unseen (Hebrews 11:1). Christ's death and resurrection inaugurated the coming of God's kingdom not as some sort of metaphor or spiritual truth, but in reality. As Christians, as those who have faith in Jesus Christ, we participate in this reality. Our "old selves" have died and we have been reborn (John 3). Obviously, this new birth, this new creation, is not of the same manner as Jesus' death on the cross and physical resurrection, but Paul wants us to grasp that our own "death and resurrection" *with Christ* are no less real. The links that bound us to the old order have been severed and, instead, we have been bound to a new and heavenly order.

I realize that all this can seem very abstract and hard to grasp, but that doesn't make it any less true. In keeping with our rebirth, we are to put away the old and clothe ourselves with the new (3:10).

We are to shed our old lives and embrace our new lives. We are to strip off our old selves and put on our new selves. Off with the old clothes, on with the new. Paul works this metaphor really hard!! Why? Perhaps, Paul has in mind the baptism practices of the early church. Many of the Christians in the first century were converts from paganism and came into the Christian community as adults. Frequently, they would wear old clothes to the baptism and emerge from their immersion to put on a new set of white clothes, signifying the purity of the new life they were entering.¹

When we put on this new life, this “new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (v. 10), the transformation encompasses our whole being. Intellectually, we believe things that we didn’t before, about ourselves, this world, about our purpose in life, and so on. Morally, we gain a different sense of right and wrong, of good and evil. Behaviors, thoughts, even TV shows and movies which once seemed harmless, no longer do. Emotionally, we love differently. We lavish less love upon ourselves and pour out our love upon God and one another.

“The wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.”

So often with the Bible, it is possible to be reading along comfortably only to be blindsided by a phrase like the “wrath of God” in Colossians 3:6. I’m pretty sure that for many of us, talk of God’s wrath makes us squirm, but not only because we know how far short we fall of God’s standards. We also wonder, how do we square the wrath of God with our proclamation that God is love?

The mistake we often make is to set God’s love and God’s wrath against one another as if they are mutually exclusive. They are not. Across the Old and the New Testaments, from the prophets to Jesus to Paul, the proclamation of God’s mercy is accompanied by the preaching of God’s wrath.

God’s wrath is not an unbridled passion nor is it capricious. God’s wrath is a holy anger directed at everything that separates God from his loved ones. Simply put, God’s wrath is rightly directed at sin. What sort of god would stand idly by at the murder of a child or treat casually all the evil that we do to one another. Only by grasping the immensity of God’s wrath can we grasp the immensity of God’s mercy.

Sometimes I wonder why we get so troubled by God’s anger at sin. Perhaps it is because we live in a world that so often responds to sin with apathy.

We become spiritually open to God, but also to the spiritual needs of others. We see the image of God in those whom we once ignored, or worse, oppressed.² The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Doin’ what comes naturally?

The renewal, the transformation, that Paul speaks of is real. It is as concrete as Jesus’ own death and resurrection. But it is also only the beginning. We still must learn to walk in the Spirit of Christ, to walk in God’s way, to walk in a manner befitting the new clothes that we wear. Paul knows that we are talking about a process, not merely a moment. It is why he speaks of the new self as *being* renewed. It is in the same sense as our proclamation that God’s kingdom has come *already*, but *not yet* in all its fullness. We have been renewed *and* we are being renewed. We have been saved *and* we are being saved.

Paul wrote to the Galatians in a similar vein, “If [since!] we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). Even for those who have been “raised with Christ,” getting rid of the old and putting on the new does not come naturally and if we were on our own in this, we would fail. But we are not alone. Rather, God has provided a helper and comforter, the Holy Spirit, who guides us, guards us, and strengthens us so that we may truly become whole, complete, and mature disciples of Christ (Matthew 5:48). The Holy Spirit is God’s presence with us and in us, every step of the way.

Solid food

Paul once told the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:2) that they were not yet ready for “solid food.” Scripture passages like today’s challenge us as well. Paul’s phrases are so rich and packed with meaning as to be virtually inexhaustible. Yet, we sometimes allow ourselves to be intimidated by such passages. But, in truth, this “solid food” will repay a slow and thoughtful reading.

¹from Tom Wright’s, *Paul for Everyone: The prison letters*, published Westminster John Knox Press in the U.S., 2003. Dr. Wright is currently the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England.

²I’ve paraphrased some of this from John Stackhouse’s new book, *Humble Apologetics*, Oxford press, 2002.

Daily Bible Readings

(all the other Lectionary readings for today and a few more)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Psalm 107:1-9, 43 Thanksgiving for deliverance	Day 2 Hosea 14 A plea for repentance and an assurance of forgiveness
Day 3 Luke 12:13-21 The parable of the rich fool	Day 4 Colossians 1:3-14 Paul thanks God for the Colossians
Day 5 Colossians 1:15-23 The supremacy of Christ	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

August Book Recommendation

The Bible Makes Sense, by Walter Brueggemann

In keeping with today's Scripture passage of "solid food," this book is probably the best introduction to Brueggemann, one of today's leading Old Testament scholars and teachers. This is a brief volume suitable for individuals and groups, with questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter. Brueggemann wants us to learn to read the Bible as an "insider," to see life from a biblical perspective. Think of this book as a road map into the strange world of the Bible. He helps us to use our imaginations and to see the Bible as more than a newspaper-like account of the past. Scripture is God's Word and the spiritual journal of God's people.

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

The eighth "Fruit of the Spirit" evening lecture, *Patience*, will be this Tuesday, August 3, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Rev. Kathryn Self.

**Next Sunday is *SECOND SUNDAY* with the music of *Step-by-Step!*
10:30 in Wesley Hall. Join us!!**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The difficulty of writing a background study on this passage from Colossians is that, like so much of Paul, every sentence, every phrase, is packed with meaning and power. Yet, we sometimes shy away from such passages. If we do more than let our minds dance across the surface of the words, it can all seem so "heavy." Do you ever feel intimidated by such passages? Do you find yourself reading quickly past much of it? What can we do to help ourselves to be ready for, to even desire, "solid food"?
2. When writing this study, I didn't choose to concentrate on the virtues that Paul enumerates in v. 12-14. In Paul's metaphor, these virtues describe the new clothes that we put on when we place our faith (our trust) in Jesus Christ (in standard Christian vocabulary this is called "justification") and begin our renewal (in standard Christian vocabulary, the process of renewal is called "sanctification"). Are these virtues prized by the "real world" that we live and work in every day? Paul urges us not to lie to one another. Is this "realistic"? Are these truly the virtues that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, try to embrace each day? If not, why not? What holds us back? What do you think Paul means when he writes that loves binds everything together in perfect harmony?