

December 28, 2003
Christmastide
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Clothing Ourselves with Christ

Colossians 3:12-14 *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

I find a spiritual relief in getting beyond the culturally shaped Christmas season, the hurriedness, the stress, the spiritual struggle to stay focused on what the season truly means! Now in the quiet that follows the culturally shaped Christmas season, we have a pause, a time to be like Mary who “pondered these things in her heart.” Mary was a contemplative. She was able to let things sink into her soul. She was inwardly listening for deeper meanings. It is good we have the season of Christmastide to let things sink in, to listen deeply, to let ourselves be changed by what we have seen and heard.

The reading from Paul's Letter to the Colossians is perfect for this First Sunday after Christmas! It is one of Paul's most sublime passages. It is about the content and quality of the new life we have in Christ. This reading gives us just what we need to contemplate in these days of Christmastide—what it means for us to live in response to God's love and word embodied in Christ. In fact, this passage is like finding an overlooked present hiding behind the Christmas tree. It is so rich and full. Like a fruitcake, crammed full of everything sweet and tasty. Or for the health-minded, a huge basket of every kind of delicious fruit. The problem is that there is far too much to eat at one sitting! It would make us feel a bit sick if we tried to take in the whole thing! So today I want to focus on just the first three verses. Then we'll work with the remainder next Sunday.

Paul is talking about new life in Christ. It is our true humanity. It is not a strange and alien “religious” life to which we are called, but to our true selves. God dwelling in Christ. The Incarnation. The Word becoming flesh. All of these high-powered words point to the truth than in Jesus we see and receive what it means to be true human beings. The old, false self that causes us so much pain is exposed and banished. The new self, which is really our truly old self, the self created in God's image, is remembered and recovered. In Christ we awaken to who we really are.

“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.” God's love is a choosing love, a love that goes out of its way to claim us, to embrace us, to wake us up to our true selves. Paul liked to describe God's love as a “choosing” love. He also liked the similar word “adoption.” He used it often to describe God's love that runs deeper than the love built on blood connections, on family ties, on emotions alone. Adoption is a choosing to love so that all belong, so that all are included. So, Paul is calling us God's chosen ones, who share God's holiness and who are beloved, cherished eternally by God. That's the kind of love we know in Christ. That's the kind of love God packaged in Jesus and presented to us all.

God's loving of us seeks a response. And so Paul writes “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Clothing ourselves is also a favorite term of Paul's. It's part of Paul's baptismal language. When we are baptized, he said, we “put on Christ,” like a new set of clothes. Paul uses this image to describe the process of letting this

new and true humanity grow in us. Paul believed that in baptism we have already received this new life. It's a complete gift, a done deal. But it is also our vocation, our calling to continue to "put on" this new life, to grow and mature in it. Paul is saying that our baptism is an ongoing process of putting on this new life, or if you will, growing into this new set of clothes. Putting on this new life is the emerging of our true selves, the selves that have gotten lost, covered over, forgotten, or simply talked out of us by the dominant values of our culture and time.

Now Paul talks about some of the "garments" in this new wardrobe.

Compassion. A genuine and clear sensitivity to others and their needs and conditions in life. It is not feeling sorry for others, which puts us in a superior position. It is an identification with others as our brothers and sisters, and a stirring in us of positive action on their behalf. This is God's own compassion living in us. The Hebrew word for God's mercy or compassion (*rechamim*) means literally a stirring of the womb—a definite feminine image of God! Paul uses two Greek words here (*splankna oiktirmou*) which have the same kind of meaning—a deep, inward stirring of compassion. God's compassion was stirred by Israel's slavery in Egypt, which prompted God to come to Israel's aid and bring liberation. This is why the talk these days of "compassionate conservatism" is so off the mark. For it only means keeping the *status quo*, leaving people to fend for themselves while safeguarding the comfort and privilege of those who are affluent and powerful. Compassion that is rooted in God's own compassion identifies with those who are in need, is stirred to action that brings relief, and gives up its own status and privilege for the sake of others. Put on compassion!

Kindness. [*chrestoteta*, generosity, goodness, kindness] True kindness breaks through the cycle of tit-for-tat, of responding to others in the same way they act toward us. It is kindness toward the unkind as well as the kind. Otherwise we would be no different than anyone else and bring nothing transforming to this world, nothing of Christ. True kindness sees deeply into the other person, that here is one with whom I share a common humanity, who is made in God's image just as I am, who is, no matter how he or she acts, a brother or sister in God's love. This kindness treats others according to their true humanity. And we are able to do this because when we put on Christ, we put off the old, self that is caught up in defensiveness and the fruitless cycle of "giving as good as one gets." Put on kindness!

Humility. Paul means a spirit that is not seeking its own gain and status, but the common good. It is not the spirit so prevalent in our nation today, a proud and haughty, violent spirit of domination. It is a spirit that knows its place within the wide, complex, and diverse reality of God's creation. The Latin word *humus* means "of the earth." This kind of "earthiness" is so critically needed today. It means knowing our connectedness to the earth and all creation, not the separateness and human-centeredness that have brought destruction to our own home, the earth. Humility recognizes that you and I do not have a separate existence, like marbles in a bag, just banging against each other. We are essentially attached and related. We live in a completely interdependent world and universe. Our lack of humility, our pride, our narrow self-interests, give rise to actions that destroy the very balance of life that God has created. Put on humility!

Meekness. "Blessed are the meek," taught Jesus, "for they will inherit the earth." Not the proud and self-seeking, not the powerful, but the meek. Meekness is close to the meaning of humility. Maybe with only an inflection of difference. Something like having an active considerateness of others and of life around us. Being those who are able to be taught and informed by life itself, not caught up in our own notions and ideas and thoughts about how things ought to be. Put on meekness!

Patience. It means patience, but also forbearance and steadfastness. It is the opposite of flying off the handle, or looking for quick results, or being always thrown for a loop when things don't go as we want or expect. It also means commitment for the long haul,

commitment to our own spiritual growth, to community, to life itself. For growth and community to take place, we cannot be impatient and looking for quick solutions and easy answers. We must stop looking for that “perfect” community of people who pose us no problems or discomforts, and commit ourselves to a specific community. Patience recognizes that God is at work in the depths of life, bringing about all that is needed. Thus we need to cultivate our capacity to be patient, to watch and wait. Put on patience!

Paul devotes some extra words to forgiveness. Bear with each other, he says. Put up with each other, for we are all in the same boat, we all have the same weaknesses, needs, and shortcomings. In forgiveness we are able to put aside the demanding spirit that demands perfection in ourselves and others. We are able to move beyond and through the clashes, the hurts, the misunderstandings, all the obstacles that inevitably happen in community. Paul is really re-stating the Lord’s Prayer when he reminds us that our forgiving of each other flows from God’s forgiveness of us all. We are to treat each other just as God has treated us. Put on forgiveness!

The last piece of clothing is the most important, the one that holds it all together. The sash. The belt. The suspenders. The overcoat. Or, if you’re going out on a snowy, slushy day, don’t forget the goulashes! “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Not romantic love. Not sentimentalized love. Not the saccharine sort of love that can’t deal with the messy realities of life in community. But the very *agape* of God embodied in Jesus. Not a feeling, an emotion, but a way of being and acting toward one another that maintains and deepens community.

This love breaks through barriers and breaks down walls in order to unite, to bring together, and create community. This love goes beyond the boundaries we set up in our small mindedness and small heartedness—race, nation, religion, gender and sexual orientation, culture. Those who know this love in their hearts and struggle to live it in their lives are always challenging the narrower so-called loves, the tribal definitions of love taught us from birth—who is our friend and who is our enemy, who is like us and who is abnormal, who is one of us and who is the outsider. The Gospel of God’s love in Christ knows nothing of the sort, but constantly reaches beyond boundaries and walls and barriers. This kind of love, which is God’s own love lived through us, always chooses to love when it would seem more “natural,” “realistic,” “rational” not to love.

Putting on this kind of life is a tall order! It doesn’t come quickly or easily. That is why we speak of being on an “inward journey.” The inward journey is the daily work of touching base with the new life we already have been given in Christ, the new humanity that is already ours as gift. It is also the working with that gift so that it comes to full maturity in us. Paul has given us a good and lively image for our inward journey. It is our putting on and growing into the new life God has given us.

O God, you have given us new life in Christ. It is a gift, only to be received with thankful hearts. Grant us the kind of spiritual life that works each and every day to put on this new life so that we become what you have already made us—your chosen ones, holy and beloved. Amen.