

What to Wear

“What to wear, what to wear?” Some mornings, if Connie or I are feeling particularly brain-dead first thing in the morning, one of us is likely to stand in front of our open closet and repeat those words, to which the other will invariably reply, “Be a trendsetter. Wear the green.” We’re both pretty sure that’s a quotation from the TV show, *M*A*S*H*, which both of us watched faithfully, back in the day, though I can’t find the attribution. It’s really just a silly way that we reassure each other that the decision of what to wear on a given day is hardly a life-changing matter. Of course, you wouldn’t think that if you’d ever watched another TV show, this one with a name that’s the negative of our little quotation. *What Not to Wear* is a long-running BBC television series that was imported by BBC America and has now been copied with American hosts and guests by The Learning Channel. In both versions, women are guided through an extensive make-over of their wardrobe by “experts” who assure them that their lives will be radically changed for the better simply with a new ‘do, the proper application of makeup and, of course, just the right clothes. Clearly, based on its success, people all over the UK and the US find it entertaining or inspiring. I find it deeply disturbing, primarily for the shallow values it promotes. In the BBC version, at least, the original hosts, Trinny and Susannah, usually seemed to be genuinely interested in helping people with their fashion skills, if a bit sarcastic in their remarks behind the client’s back. The American version, however, in the few times I’ve watched it, seems to be mostly aimed at humiliating the make-over candidates. But maybe I’ve just seen the wrong episodes.

The show, and what it implies about western culture, certainly seems to be at odds with the teaching of Jesus we read this morning. “Don’t worry about what to wear,” says Jesus. Matthew’s Greek would probably be better translated as “don’t be preoccupied by,” or “don’t be absorbed with,” or “don’t be obsessed with” what to wear. In Jesus’ view, it’s just plain foolish to put too much energy into worrying about what we’re going to wear or what we’re going to eat. The importance of life is not to be found in these things – they are not what truly measure us. Jesus would take exception to that old saw, “Clothes make the man.”

Of course, Jesus and those who heard him teach this idea had a far different perspective from you or me. The fact that I can stand in front of a brimming closet and dresser and ask, “what to wear,” is a telling indication of just how different my life is from that of a first century Jew or almost everyone else in that time. Come to think of it, my experience is different from the majority of people in this time or any other time as well. All of us here today have been blessed with a lifestyle that would be opulent by most standards. As we approach Thanksgiving, we have much to give thanks for. God has indeed provided us with all good gifts and it is right to give God thanks and praise.

For me, part of the lesson that Jesus’ words convey during this Thanksgiving week, is that if we become obsessed with our material goods, then we are not giving proper focus to thanking God for what we have. There is very little that is truly required for life – a warm, dry place of shelter; clothing appropriate to the climate, enough food and water to sustain us in health. That’s all. Yet we, as a society, place such importance on acquisition. To be satisfied with and grateful for a little, for enough, seems a far more blessed life than the continual striving for things. As Jesus remarks, it is those who live outside a relationship with the Loving Creator who feel the need to strive for more than what is needful. When we make acquisition our only priority, when we obsess over food and clothes and cars and houses and all the detritus of modern life, we make

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those things our gods, just as surely as the Gentiles of Jesus' time worshipped false gods of their own devising.

In fact, when we turn from thanking God for providing for us and focus on how we will use our own strength and will to acquire the things we desire, we are running the danger of setting ourselves up in God's place. I read this week of a writer named John Leax, who teaches at Houghton College in New York and lives on a small farm nearby. The farm includes an orchard which has fallen into a rather wild condition as Leax's schedule precludes keeping up all the cultivation of the farm. Leax writes that on a recent visit to Ontario, he was struck by an oppressive feeling of sadness as he drove through large, well-ordered commercial orchards, the kind of sight that makes the heart of the modern agra-businessman glad. He mentally compared the vista before him to his memory of the cozy comfort he felt in his own run-down little orchard. "Though I feel my failure to bring the old orchard to fruitfulness," he writes, "I feel no real guilt, why in fact I feel a sort of pleasure in watching it turn wild and useless. When I walk in it, it tells me that a man's caring comes to an end. It tells me that life is lived within the boundaries of extremes, of wildness and domestication. It tells me that my order is not the only order. And in its message I feel comfort." Leax finds the same message in his orchard that Jesus saw in the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. It is not all on our shoulders. God provides for God's creation in a way that no human being ever could. We can count on God for what is truly important in our lives. Those very lives, our relationship with our Creator, all are a gift from God.

It is one of the grand paradoxes of our faith that we are taught to seek that which is freely given, that relationship with God. In a metaphor that made sense for his time, Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. We may be able to understand it better by thinking of the phrase popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "the Beloved Community." Paul taught that we are saved, brought into loving relationship with God in the Beloved Community, by grace through God's gift of faith. Jesus said, seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. We seek that which God will gladly give us. And in pursuing relationship with our Creator, we also pursue right relationship with our neighbors and all creation. Whether we think of the Kingdom or the Beloved Community, we are not imagining a private relationship but one that includes at least as many as an earthly kingdom or community and, given the omnipresence of the Ground of Being, everyone and everything that is or has been or is yet to be. The righteousness of the Kingdom that Jesus teaches us to seek is not just a personal rightness according to what we understand of God's will but rather a quest that all things in this world should be brought into the will of God. In other words, justice.

I am glad that issues of social justice are important to this congregation. I believe it shows that we are indeed seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness when we pursue projects that house and feed the vulnerable in our society; projects like our senior housing and our community gardens. As I thought of Jesus' words this week, though, I began to wonder about the places in my own life where justice does not always inform my decisions. As I look into my closet and wonder what to wear, have I been careful to select clothing made by workers who are paid a fair wage? What sort of damage has been done to the Earth, I wonder, in producing the fabrics that make up my clothes? Were the natural fibers organically grown and harvested? What sort of impact to the environment was caused by the production of those few remaining polyesters? I

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can ask the same sorts of questions as I peruse my refrigerator and pantry for what to eat. How do my choices contribute to the demise of the small farm, to the over-reliance on pesticides and herbicides, to the plight of the migrant farm workers who included my own family only one generation ago? What sorts of impacts will be felt by our children and our children's children if we do not pursue justice even in the most basic daily decisions? I hear this morning Jesus' call to seek before all else the good of God's Beloved Community and justice for all that God loves.

It makes a difference when we remember that God loves all the world. It makes a difference when we remember that we, specifically, are chosen, set apart and beloved. That's how our passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians begins. If we are having trouble this morning feeling any great gratitude for the mundane things of life like food and clothes, here is a word of Good News that should fill us with thankfulness until our chests swell and our eyes well up. We are beloved of the Creator of the universe. Not merely tolerated, not set on our paths with a pat on the head and allowed to go off on our merry way, but beloved, cared for, chosen, set apart for something special. That's what it means to be holy, not that we are better or different from anyone else in our own right, but that God has chosen us as God's own and planned something significant for us to do.

William Loader, the Australian theologian whose work I often find helpful, has a very practical view of this word of blessing to the Colossians and to us: "This is not just an appeal to status - as if then to shame people into behaving in a way consistent with that status. Rather these people have an extraordinary starting point: they know that they are valued and loved. If only this could sink into their awareness fully, they would be finding that it would generate a whole new set of attitudes and behaviours and enable them to leave other (ideas and acts) aside as irrelevant. The latter would include all those attitudes and behaviours which see other human beings as competitors to be outdone or who see them as people to be won to liking us, so that we can feel important. Such attitudes are the seed of aggression when we feel our value is threatened, of manipulation and self obsession when our agenda becomes one of winning people's affection, of power when we sense that the only way to matter is to control or subjugate others." In a book that I heartily recommend to seekers of all ages, entitled Searching for God Knows What, Donald Miller does a wonderful job of weaving this concept throughout the story of his own search for relationship with God. Once we truly understand and believe that we are loved by God, our need to compete with others, to put them down so we can pull ourselves up, is vanquished. When we accept the love of God into our own lives, we are free to love others without fear of somehow diminishing ourselves by promoting them. When we immerse ourselves in love, when we, as Paul urges, clothe ourselves in love, then we can function in harmony with our sisters and brothers and truly practice the other virtues Paul recommends for our spiritual wardrobes.

With this crucial truth established, Paul goes on to use his own version of the "what to wear" metaphor. It's an image that Paul seems fond of. To the Galatians, he wrote, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." He actually begins his use of this figure of speech earlier in chapter 3 of Colossians with what *not* to wear: "But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according

to the image of its creator.” In his exegesis for The Interpreter’s Bible, Francis W. Beare remarks that the list of vices here and the list of virtues in our passage for this morning, “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” both number five and he calls them “counterpart pentads.” It reminds me of what the singer Emmylou Harris has to say on her album, “Live at the Ryman” with the Nash Ramblers. She tells how a song they are about to perform had been written in three-part harmony, a triad, but they decided to add a fourth voice, so “now it’s a crawdad.” But I digress...

Jesus has taught us to take our focus off of the material in our lives: food, drink, clothes. He has guided us instead to seek the Beloved Community and justice. Paul tells us what needs to be in our spiritual wardrobes to bring that quest into our daily lives: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love. “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” he writes. It’s always worth noting, I think, that peace as described in the Bible, shalom, is far more than the absence of conflict. In his book, Colossians: Christ Above All, my late teacher, Dr. Harold Songer, cites the Greek writer Epicurus as how not to understand peace. “The absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the mind,” is how Epicurus defined peace in the third century BC. That is not the same as shalom, the peace of Christ. Dr. Songer, it always seemed to me, knew something about shalom. With his white hair and wire-rim glasses, his gentle Appalachian-inflected voice, and his customary dress shirt, tie and cardigan, he was the very picture of a scholar. Yet he exuded a relaxed confidence that was inspiring to his students. “It’s easy to be laid back when you’ve got something to lean on,” he used to say. He gave every indication of being a man who had learned not to worry about the little things that God has promised to provide, who knew how to lean on God. He seemed to don shalom with that cardigan every morning.

In Peaceteacher: Jesus’ Way of Shalom, Stephen D. Jones writes, “When Jesus spoke of peace, he used the Hebrew word, shalom. To the Jews, shalom is holistic. It isn’t only about nonviolence or cessation of hostilities. Indeed, there could hardly be a more positive word. ‘Shalom is an iridescent word, with many levels of meaning in Hebrew Scripture. The base denominator of its many meanings is well-being, wholeness, completeness.’ To translate it as ‘peace’ fails to capture its fuller meaning in Hebrew. Shalom certainly includes an absence of war and commitment to nonviolence, but it also has to do with personal wholeness and societal harmony. It has to do with seeking the well being and personal fulfillment of everyone. Shalom embraces justice and peace with oneself, with others and with God. Shalom is a word of hope, describing the emerging Peace of God. Shalom has to do with living God’s way with others, with society and with the created order.” Again, the emphasis on what Paul is teaching is not on our individual desire for peace, for the cessation of pain in the body and trouble in the mind, but on how we participate in the creation of God’s shalom for all humankind. In leaving behind petty, selfish concerns, in putting on the virtues characterized by love and forgiveness, we show that we are seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness.

These teachings from Jesus and from Paul this morning have something in common besides the metaphor of clothing. Both passages are about gratitude, about Thanksgiving, which is what makes them so apt this week. Jesus does not speak directly of gratitude but he certainly reminds us of what we have to be grateful for as he enumerates the Father’s care for us. Paul makes sure we remember to be grateful. “Be thankful,” he writes in verse 15. “With gratitude in your hearts

sing psalms,” says verse 16. And he concludes with “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” It is a beautiful concept but a difficult one. There is so much in life, in what we have to do, that is hard to be grateful for. It’s hard to be grateful for rush hour traffic. It’s hard to be grateful for ungrateful and rude people. For some, it may be hard to be grateful for a job that seems like a dead-end, or where one’s contributions are not valued. For the students in our midst, it may be hard to be grateful for classwork that seems irrelevant to our goals, even though we parents may preach the opposite. It is hard for us to get up in the morning and put on gratitude like a garment. But that is exactly what Paul is suggesting here. I am always amazed, inspired and a little abashed at stories of those saints who are able to deck themselves in gratitude on a daily basis. In my own reading, I’m slowly working my way through a slender volume called The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a monk, an obscure lay brother in France in the Seventeenth Century. We remember him for his little book in which he revealed the secret of the joy and gratitude for which he was well-known. Brother Lawrence practiced focusing on the presence of God wherever he went, whatever he did. For him, peeling potatoes was as holy a moment as taking communion. He was grateful for all things; whatever he did, he did in the name of the Lord Jesus.

It is good for us today, this week, and in all our days to come, to give thanks for all that God has blessed us with, for the necessities and for all our abundance. But true thanksgiving is not to focus on what we have or what we want but on the love of God that has provided for us and on how we are called to extend that love to others, seeking and participating in the creation of the Beloved Community, pursuing justice for all humankind and all creation in every choice that we make. True gratitude is in loving and forgiving and spreading shalom to all in our path. As we prepare for our national holiday of Thanksgiving, let us take this opportunity to consider how our thanks to God may continue to guide us in loving our families, our friends, and all who are loved by God. For all that we are and all that we have and all that we do, thanks be to God.