

New Clothes For Christmas

I want to thank Diana Dallal for filling in for us at piano this morning and on Christmas Eve. I especially appreciate her fulfilling my request for a special offertory piece this morning, “Christmas Time is Here.” I hope you all recognized that Vince Guaraldi tune from the classic TV special, “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” I think it’s my favorite Christmas-time movie because it uses the gentle humor of the Peanuts gang to remind us of the true meaning of Christmas. In case you’ve forgotten, the through-line of the script concerns Charlie Brown’s search for the meaning of Christmas. In the opening scene, Charlie Brown and his friend Linus Van Pelt are seen headed to the pond to join the rest of the gang for skating. They sit for a moment on a low wall and Charlie Brown says, “I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.” In the early going, Charlie Brown interacts with family and friends who are pursuing Christmas in their own way. Snoopy is decorating his doghouse with boxes and boxes of lights, trying to win the neighborhood contest. Lucy Van Pelt confides in Charlie Brown, “I know how you feel about all this Christmas business, getting depressed and all that. It happens to me every year. I never get what I really want. I always get a lot of stupid toys or a bicycle or clothes or something like that.” “What is it you want?” asks Charlie Brown. “Real estate,” she says. Even Charlie Brown’s little sister Sally, just barely removed from the innocence of infancy, has a long, long list for Santa Claus. “All I want is what I have coming to me,” she says when Charlie Brown protests. “All I want is my fair share.”

By the end of the program, of course, it is the wise-for-his-age Linus who steers Charlie Brown in the right direction. “Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about,” he says and proceeds to recite those words from the Gospel According to Luke that I can never read or hear without thinking of his piping young voice: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not: for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’” “That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Out of the mouths of babes... But I want to extend Linus’ lesson this morning. Of course, the birth of the Christ Child in Bethlehem is the basis for Christmas. It is not, as hard as our commercial society may try to convince us, simply another excuse for conspicuous consumption. The holiday was not established in order to sell things, no matter how much or how little we may actually need them or how badly the gross national product may need the retail boost in the fourth quarter. The holiday of Christmas, the Holy Day, to be more linguistically precise, was established to give us an opportunity to focus on the miraculous Incarnation of God, to marvel at what it means for humankind that the Word became Flesh, and, I would suggest this morning, to consider what our appropriate response should be to this Cosmos-changing event. And I join the Apostle Paul this morning in saying that at least part of our response should be to put on new clothes.

New Clothes For Christmas

How many of you got new clothes for Christmas? When I was a boy, I hated getting clothes as Christmas presents. I wasn't looking for real estate, like Lucy Van Pelt. I wanted fun stuff – toys, games, books, and, as I got a little older, records. Clothes, I believed, with the selfish thoughtlessness typical of a pampered middle-class child, were something my parents should just buy for me when I needed them. Christmas and my birthday were for giving me stuff I wanted. I like getting clothes for Christmas, now. I even put clothes on my Christmas list and some of my favorite bits of apparel came to me as gifts from family or friends. I guess you could say that I've matured in my attitude, at least in that regard. In other ways, I think I'm still working to grow up. Growing up is an important part of the human experience. In fact, had we read the Old Testament or Gospel lessons out of this morning's lectionary, we would have heard descriptions of two little boys who grew up to become God's men. I Samuel 2:26 says, "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people." Luke 2:52, in a close echo, says, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in favor with God and the people." Paul's lesson for us today, in addition to being about the true meaning of Christmas, is about how we show our maturity by putting on our new clothes.

Paul uses the metaphor of putting on clothing as a way of describing our new life in Christ in most of his letters. It's an image that may have less impact for us today than it did for Paul's original audience. After all, we change clothes at least daily – I've seen my wife don three or four different sets of clothes in a day as she progressed from jammies to "work-around-the-house" clothes to "go to the mall" clothes to party clothes. But most folks in Paul's day would have had one set of clothes, washed when possible, mended when needed, until they were threadbare. In fact, early in the life of the Church, new Christians were given a new white tunic to don after their baptism, signifying the purity of their new life in Christ. We still see this custom reflected today in the white baptismal robes used by many Christians. It was the inspiration for the white "Good Shepherd" golf shirts I gave to Karl, Ben & Kym when they were baptized this summer. Many commentators think that Paul would have had such a ceremony in mind when he wrote this to the Colossians. And, in Paul's time, the old saying "clothes make the man" would have been especially true. You could tell a person's social status and probably their profession by their clothing. Really, this remained true until quite recently. Now, you can't tell a blue jeans and Gore-Tex wearing CEO from her janitor.

So, for Paul, the image of the clothes you wore would have been revelatory of your core identity. He's not talking to the Colossians in this passage about slipping on a costume to play a fictitious role. He's telling them and us how to conform our lives to the life of Jesus. All of the positive attributes that Paul mentions here, "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" are traits that he elsewhere in his writings ascribes to God, Father or Son. Paul understands that by consciously adopting these attitudes, they will slowly become our natural response to others. I'm reminded of two of my favorite pieces of literature. First, in Shakespeare's great play, "Hamlet," the prince says to his mother, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not. / That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat, / Of habits devil, is angel yet in this, / That to the use of actions fair and good / He likewise gives a frock or livery, / That aptly is put on... / For use almost can change the stamp of nature, / And either tame the devil, or throw him out / With wondrous potency." The idea of assuming external virtues until they change you internally is the whole theme of Max Beerbohm's delightful short story, "The Happy Hypocrite." The story tells of a rake named Lord

New Clothes For Christmas

George Hell. In the midst of his dissolute life, he encounters a pure young woman and falls completely in love. He attempts to woo her but she is repulsed by his evil appearance, for his face is twisted with his life of crimes and misbehaviors, and tells him she will only have a man with the face of a saint. Lord George Hell disguises himself with a mask of a handsome and innocent face and successfully courts her under the name of Lord George Heaven, reforming his behavior to ensure winning the young woman. They marry and, out of love for her, George commits himself to a morally upright life, repaying those he has cheated and giving the bulk of his misbegotten fortune to charity. When his past catches up with him in the form of a discarded lover and he is forced to remove his mask, he is astounded to find that his face now matches not only the mask he wore but also his new life of love and selflessness. He and his true love live happily ever after.

Part of the conversion of Lord George Hell comes from the love which is extended to him by the young woman. Paul points to a similar impact upon us by the love which we receive from God. We are God's chosen ones, he writes, set apart by God as God's own people and beloved by God. It is so important for us to be secure in the idea that we are loved if we are to grow in love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ourselves. William Loader comments, "The author is addressing people who should understand themselves as "chosen, holy and loved". 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 (behaviours) aside as irrelevant... When we begin to take seriously that we are 'chosen, holy, and loved' by God, then we begin to value ourselves and not need to embark on the array of strategies which keep people busy trying to make themselves special. This kind of change does not happen overnight, but is part of our development in maturity as people." It's a little like another scene from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" – when Charlie Brown abandons his little Christmas tree in despair over his inability to please his friends or to avoid damaging the tree, Linus leads the gang in "dressing up" the tree with Snoopy's ornaments. As the formerly forlorn little tree is revealed in all its new glory, Linus says, "I never thought it was such a bad little tree. It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love."

A little love – or, in the case of each of us and what we receive from God through Christ Jesus, a lot of love, more love than we can fathom. That is what is behind that story of the baby in the manger, the story that we join Linus Van Pelt in proclaiming "what Christmas is all about." "Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" – those are the clothes that we put on as we mature in our lives in Christ, becoming the people that Jesus taught us to be, that God wants us to be. In another metaphor very appropriate to this time of year, Paul tells the Christians in Colossae to "let the peace of Christ rule in (their) hearts." I call the image appropriate because the word translated in our NRSV as "rule" is actually a word taken from the Greek sporting world. We might say, "Let the peace of Christ be the referee in your life." If we play life by that ref's rule book, we're a whole lot less likely to find our lives set back by the penalties that will certainly accrue if we disregard the rules of peace.

Hmmm... love, peace... I think we can find joy and hope in this passage as well to complete our Christmas quartet. We have certainly expressed our deep joy in Jesus' birth this morning by

New Clothes For Christmas

singing wonderful old Christmas carols. That can't possibly be very far off from what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." And, as for hope, can anything be more hopeful than an approach to life which mirrors the last verse in this passage? "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." To be able to give thanks to God in all the things we do requires an outlook that interprets all of life as a reason to be thankful, a truly hope-full and joyous existence. 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, especially holiday mall traffic. It's hard to be grateful for ungrateful and rude people, especially when Christmas shopping. 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 one's 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. There is a classic of Christian literature, a slender volume of devotion that I read not too long ago, 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.

Hope, Joy, Peace, Love... "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience"... these are the garments, the new Christmas clothes that Paul calls on us all to put on so that they can mold our lives. Do you have new Christmas clothes this morning? Or perhaps have the two days since Christmas morning started to put some smudges and ravel on your white robes? Has the Christmas spirit begun to dissipate for you already? Has the clutter of Christmas gotten on your nerves or have you already gotten tired of the sounds of that new video game or the new DVD or CD already played a dozen times since Christmas Eve? Remember, my brothers and sisters that you are loved, that you are special and chosen, and so are all of those in whom you come in contact. We must put on our new Christmas clothes and wear them around as we interact with the folks at home, at school, at work, on the road. Wearing our Christmas clothes and living lives that live up to those beautiful new garments is the blessing that we give to a world in great need of such a blessing. Just like Charlie Brown, our neighbors are crying out to hear the real meaning of Christmas. Let us go out this third day of Christmas to love them and to show them the truth of Christ's compassion, his kindness, his humility, his patience. Let us show them our new Christmas clothes on this day and on every day to come. Amen.