

**Sermon:** Before getting to the heart of my sermon, which will be based upon the lesson from Colossians, allow me to make a couple of observations about the lesson from Luke which Mary Ruth just read for us. The story Luke tells is rarely heard in Sunday worship, though some of us may have heard it in Sunday School. The story is unusual - no other biblical writers tell anything of the life of an adolescent Jesus. *There is an abundance of other ancient writings that tell of Jesus' youthful life, but they often focus on the boy Jesus as a wonder-worker - creating sparrows out of mud from a river, healing the foot of an injured worker, and even punishing those who oppose him.* In Luke's telling, Jesus is a youthful seeker after wisdom. Jesus has traveled with Joseph and Mary to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. While there, Jesus spends time in the temple where he engages in conversation with the resident teachers. It's not what one typically expects of a child, but for Jesus the temple and the teachings of his faith held a powerful attraction. He is curious about the Law and the principals undergirding the Law, and so he queries the elders in the Temple with thoughtful questions. After Passover has ended, the family starts their journey home and it isn't until the end of the day that they realize Jesus isn't with them, or with anyone in their extended family. Frantic (something we can understand) they began looking for him and it isn't until they have retraced their steps back to the temple in Jerusalem, that they find him. Both relieved and upset, Jesus gets a good scolding from his mother: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." To which he precociously replies, "Why were you searching for me? Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" As a parent, I would have wanted to strangle him, but as a follower and student of the life of Jesus I can see Luke pointing to the tension that lies between Jesus as a child of his parents and member of an extended family, and Jesus as an emissary to humankind from a heavenly Father. It's an interesting reading, and we will watch as some of its themes unfold in Luke's gospel - which we will be reading through much of the coming year.

Turning now to the letter to Colossians, we read Paul's words of instruction: *"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."* Some years ago my eldest son Nathanael gave me a new sweater for Christmas. It was a lovely sweater, but came with instructions: "This sweater is to be worn with jeans," he had written on the card. I protested that it would look just fine with a pair of wool slacks, but he insisted it be worn with jeans. "You need to update your look, dad," he said. In a similar way, the Apostle Paul is challenging the followers of Jesus Christ to update their 'look;' only in their case, the update has to do with character and personality. *"Bear with one another," Paul continues, "and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . And be thankful."* (Colossians 3:12-15) In short, Paul wants these young converts to Christian faith, new believers in Jesus Christ, to put aside their old clothes that reek of discord and envy and to put on new clothes that carry the finer fragrances of

compassion and kindness. "You were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds," Paul writes. "Now you must get rid of all such things — anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth." (Col. 1:21, 3:8) Called to represent Christ to a largely non-Christian culture and family, Paul encourages these young Christians to wear clothing appropriate to their calling, in the confidence that the new behaviors will become part of their character and personality.

One of the greatest pleasures I had in pastoral ministry was working with Confirmation students. Confirmation invites young people (although occasionally adults joined the group) to think and talk about matters that pertain to the content of the Christian faith as well as the life of faith. After months of classes and individual meetings with mentors, parents, family, mentors, and students would gather for the rite of Confirmation. At the close of the Confirmation liturgy, the students would kneel while the Pastor offered the following prayer for them (found in the UCC Book of Worship): "Grant love for others, joy in serving, peace in disagreement, patience in suffering, kindness toward all people, goodness in evil times, faithfulness in temptation, gentleness in the face of opposition, self-control in all things."<sup>1</sup> In short, the pastor prays for God to lay upon them spiritual clothing so that their lives will be a blessing to others, and so honor the Christ they represent to the world.

Of all the responsibilities that are part of Ordained Ministry, the most daunting for me is the responsibility of representing Jesus Christ and the Church before the world. I enjoy the study of the Bible, the pastoral care, and don't mind administrative tasks. Representing Jesus Christ, however, in public and private life is another matter. I don't mind describing myself as a disciple of Jesus Christ, but serving as an example of what Jesus Christ intends us to be - that's not so easy. I'm not sure I'm up to it - in fact, I'm not sure anyone is up to it. Yet, as the Rev. Lawrence Wood writes, "The priesthood of all believers means not only that we are empowered (by the divine), but also that we all represent the divine. We need to look the part."<sup>2</sup> So, how do we represent the divine in a pluralistic society where there are many religions, and many understandings of what matters? We do it by taking off whatever old clothing we wear that dishonors the Christ and harms others, and putting on new clothing that honors Christ and builds up those whom we encounter in life.

As I briefly mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the teachings and example of Jesus' compassion were quite out of step with his Jewish faith and with the wider Roman culture. Taking time to offer compassionate ministry to those living in leper colonies, or to be seen in the company of women taking seriously their concerns and opinions, were signs of weakness in the eyes of many. Now Paul is urging new Christians to take for themselves this 'mantle of weakness' by adopting the same values that were the object of scorn in Jesus' time. This more radically inclusive way of living hasn't often been welcomed into institutional Christianity, which has often acted in support of those leaders who would dominate others rather than those leaders who would serve others. Muscular Christianity is a term

---

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ*, p. 311.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wood, "Dressing Up" *Christian Century* 12/26/06, p.18.

"New Clothing"  
Colossians 3:12-17 and Luke 2:41-52

often attached to these folks, and their passion for control and domination of a society. Presently we see this desire to dominate in the Christian Nationalist movement, a movement that would make Christianity the official religion of the United States. So Jesus' example of compassion, and Paul's teaching about clothing oneself with the values of compassion, kindness, and humbleness may be seen as radical departures from social norms. It is a different way of living!

In my earliest years of ministry, I didn't enjoy wearing the pulpit robe. I'm not sure why - perhaps it was my Baptist background. I'm much more comfortable with it now, not because it is particularly comfortable, but because I've come to see that it represents my calling to be a minister of the Gospel. It is simple and humble - not stylish at all. It will never wear out! It does not attract attention to me personally, but to my calling and my office in the church. As such it is a privilege to wear it, and a challenge to live up to the best that it stands for. My greatest fear is that I might dishonor it, and so dishonor my calling and my faith. Perhaps that is why, when I am out in the community, I try to not dress like a minister. I seldom wear a collar, or carry a Bible under my arm. Thus if I am found doing wrong, or wearing the harmful kind of clothing that Paul urges his readers to discard, no one will notice that I am a minister. However, a few summers back, I was on my way to a meeting and came up behind a car that was inexplicably stopped, just sitting at the end of the street, not taking the opportunity to turn right on red. I waited a few seconds and then gently tapped my horn. Big mistake! The driver of that car got out and began shouting at me - angered that I had tooted my horn. Just then, one of my firefighter friends, working outside the station, walked over and said, "What seems to be the matter, Reverend?" "Don't call me Reverend!" I wanted to shout, "after I have just beeped my horn at this angry person!" But it was too late, and I suffered the embarrassment of having my impatience revealed - my 'old' clothing, while publicly being identified as a Pastor. Sometimes not being able to get away with a public display of impatience is the price one must pay for being a representative of Jesus Christ and the Church.

Called to represent Jesus Christ before the world; called to care for the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely; called to love first and ask questions later - we ordinary mortals need the right kind of clothing to wear - all the time, wherever we are. Paul prescribes the right clothing with these simple words: *"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 also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love . . . And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 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."* Amen.