

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: We’ve Got Good News”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
June 11, 2017

Genesis 1:26:31; Colossians 3:1-17

It was one of those nights, when in the wasteland we call cable television there was nothing to watch. In desperation Cindy and I turned to one of our online streaming services seeking something worthwhile to watch. Our only criteria was that it got almost five out of five stars as reviews. I quickly noticed one with a rather funny name, “Downtown Abbey”. After a brief discussion, we began streaming it, upon which Cindy said, “John, it is Downton Abbey. Not Downtown Abbey.” Needless to say, we were hooked. We binged watched all of season one in a week or so, and like addicts looked for more. There were many things to like about the show: its characters and actors, its plot lines, its cinematography and its costumes. For me, the costumes were wonderful, not only because they were so wonderfully made and period appropriate, but because they allowed us to know immediately who was who in the power-structure of the house. The aristocracy dressed one way, the butlers another, the maids another and the cooks another. It was this powerful reminder of how societies over the centuries used clothing to mark off social status.

This use of clothing to mark social status was nothing new in the time-period of Downton Abbey. It had been used by societies and cultures for millennia. One of the great examples is that of the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire, one could walk down the street, and by the nature of an individual’s clothing tell not only what social class they belonged to, but what place in that social cast. Slaves and ordinary workers wore tunics of dark brown, rough wool. Patricians, wore white tunics made of better wool. The magistrates had slightly different white tunics and the senatorial class had broad stripes on their tunics. And togas? Togas could only be worn by free-born Roman citizens, though people seldom wore them because they were hot and a real pain to wear. Now, many of you are probably wondering where I am going with all this discussion about status and clothing. Where I am going is to offer you the background necessary for understanding Paul’s comments to the Christians in Colossae, where Paul uses clothing as his metaphor for how the Colossians ought to live as restored followers of Jesus.

Paul begins by reminding his readers that once-upon-a-time they had first dressed like Romans. They were dressed in “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed.” All of which were hallmarks of Roman culture. This had been their ethical clothing. At the same time, they were also dressed in the ethical clothing of fallen human nature: “anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language” (sound familiar?). By being clothed in these garments would have allowed them to blend in with society and be seen as typical Romans. Their clothing would have identified them. With that having been said, Paul also reminds them that in their baptisms, by becoming followers of Jesus Christ, they had removed these garments and been clothed with a new self; a self that is being renewed. Even so, the image Paul offers in that moment is of the Colossians looking in their closet to choose what to wear in order that they be

identified as followers of Jesus. At their feet is a pile of their old clothes. In the closet are the new Jesus' clothes. Which would they wear?

Paul encourages them to dress for success, not as Romans or as fallen human's but as Christians. He writes, "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." As we listen to this ethical wardrobe that Jesus' followers are supposed to wear, we might think to ourselves that there is nothing new here. How could those items of clothing mark the Colossians off as being different; as being Christians. The answer is that these items of clothing were not appreciated or worn by Romans. These clothes were in fact seen as being inappropriate. They showed weakness. They showed a disdain for the rigid class structure of Roman society, because rich and poor, citizen and non-citizen, men and women, slave and free could wear the same clothing. These clothes were in fact a direct challenge to everything for which the Empire stood. To wear these Jesus clothes would truly get someone noticed.

The question for us this morning then is, what are we wearing? I ask that because we are living in a moment in our nation's history when it appears to be acceptable to take off the clothes that Christ has called us to wear and put on our old clothes; the clothes of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language. And let me be clear here, I am not pointing fingers at any person, political party or political position. It is all around us. It is easy to do. There is in fact something alluring about our old clothes; they fit us, they feel comfortable, they are familiar, and they slip on effortlessly. But what happens when we slip back into our old clothes; we reinforce the stereotype that millions of Americans have about how Christians dress. We are those who dress in intolerance, anger and hatred. Our challenge then is to consciously wear the clothing of Christ. Let me clear here though that wearing the clothing of Christ is not easy. It takes work to reach into our inner closets and pull out compassion, kindness, meekness, patience and love, when the world around us sees those as demonstrating weakness and not strength. It takes work and effort to wear those clothes in the face of fear, partisanship and finger pointing. It takes work and effort to continually clothe ourselves in Christ rather than in criticism of others. Yet this is what we are called to do; to do the difficult and not the easy.

My challenge to you this week is this, that each morning as you look at yourself in the mirror, ask this question, what am I wearing today? Have I put on Christ so that in me people will see Christ in their midst?

