

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Matthew 25: Clothing the Naked  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson

Deuteronomy 24:10-13, 17-18

Matthew 25:31-40

Over the past several weeks we have been studying Jesus words about how we are to show the love of God to those Jesus calls, the least of these...meaning those who are in need. We have talked about feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger and visiting the sick. Today we talk about clothing the naked. Now I realize that this is probably the strangest of all of the acts with which we are to show the love of God. After all, why would people be naked. However, this situation of persons being without clothing was a reality in the ancient world. And so in order for us to understand this phenomenon, we need to talk about clothing and money. Let's begin.

In the ancient world, unless people were the Bill Gates of Bible times, people only owned two pieces of clothing. The first was like a long T-shirt like inner garment that draped down to around the knees. It was easy to make, wear and clean. When you worked you would tie up the bottom and you had a pair of shorts. The second article of clothing was a cloak. This was a heavier item made from a single piece of cloth. It did not close in front and had two arm holes. Again if you were rich you might get sleeves as well. The cloak served as a person's coat in the cold, a rain coat in the rain, a cover for sleeping and a protection from the wind. It was the most essential piece of clothing a person could own...and because of this, it was valuable.

Now let's talk about money. Money in the ancient past was coinage and most people had little if any ready money. More often than not people dealt in trade and barter. However, there were those who found themselves in dire need for seed to sow, supplies for their trade, an animal to raise, or money to pay for food. So the question became where did you get the money you needed? The answer was you borrowed. And to borrow, you need something to use as collateral; something that had value. Since people often had nothing large of value, say a home or land, they would offer their clothing as collateral. First, they would offer their cloak. The person doing the lending would take the cloak and give money in return. The Torah made it clear that the cloak was to be returned at night to keep the one in debt warm and safe. Often though, those who were in debt could not repay that debt on time and so the lender would not only keep the cloak but they would lend more money with the inner piece of clothing as collateral. What this meant then was that the person in debt was naked. This was a humiliating state. Everyone would know that they were poor and in debt. People would make fun of them. They would be forced to work in the heat of the day with no cover. They were robbed of their humanity and dignity.

This condition was made even worse when the Torah was ignored and the lenders did not return the clothes but kept them. It would not only cause these people to be seen as being unworthy of care, or compassion, or a second chance, or even of God's love. It would risk their health and their lives. We know this because in a book called Job the writer talks about this. He writes: *The needy are kicked aside;*

*they must get out of the way. Like the wild donkeys in the desert, the poor must spend all their time just getting barely enough to keep soul and body together. They are sent into the desert to search for food for their children. They eat what they find that grows wild and must even glean the vineyards owned by the wicked. All night they had to lie naked in the cold, without clothing or covering. They were wet with the showers of the mountains and lived in caves for want of a home. The wicked snatched fatherless children from their mothers, and took a poor man's baby as a pledge before they will lend him any money or grain. That is why they must go about naked, without clothing, and are forced to carry food while they are starving."*

And so when Jesus tells his friends that they are to clothe the naked, these are the people they are to clothe; those who have fallen on hard times, those who are poor, those who have no dignity. And their friends were to clothe them because by so doing it welcomes them back into community, into family and reminds them that God still loves them.

In today's world we seldom see people walking around naked. What we do see are those whose clothes are dirty, ragged and insufficient to protect their wearers from the elements. If we are honest with ourselves, we look at those folks and we think that they must be poor, homeless, perhaps because of drug addiction. If they came to us for an interview, we would be hesitant to hire them. If they came in a light jacket in the winter, we might wonder what is wrong with them. And so our task, rather than clothing the naked is to insure that all persons, young and old, have the clothes that they need. Warm clothes in the winter. Decent clothes with which to get a job. Clothes that give them their dignity and remind them that God loves them. One ministry we support that does this is The Open Door at Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit.

For more than 50 years, Fort Street Presbyterian Church's Open-Door Program has been a beacon of hope for those most in need in our downtown Detroit neighborhoods. This open-door program feeds nearly 1,000 people each month, provides hot showers, fresh clothing, social service referrals, medical and dental screenings, flu shots, eye glasses, and health care information. But, most of all, they provide hope. Every Thursday, they open their doors to serve a hearty meal to more than 200 people who are homeless, need a hot meal or just want to enjoy the camaraderie and support of others. They also offer a Soup and Sharing Session on Wednesdays. Guests participate in small-group faith sharing, pray together and support each other with advice and words of encouragement. Food boxes are prepared bi-weekly for individuals and families who are food insecure. Pickup is on a designated day and time. Recipients are referred by churches, schools or agencies; self-referrals from those in need are also accepted.

Volunteer opportunities are available in serving food, operating the clothing closet and in giving administrative support. Contact [open-door@fortstreet.org](mailto:open-door@fortstreet.org), or call 961-4533, x107, for more information about volunteering.

You and I have been called to clothe the naked. The Open Door is one way to do this. I hope that you will consider how you might carry at this command and serve the least of these in this world.