

An Untidy Fellow

Sometimes as I get older, I am nostalgic for things that actually didn't mean a whole lot to me when I was growing up. Things that, now that I've had a chance to look back and reflect on them, I wish I'd appreciated more. Like dressing presentably.

That's what this morning's reading from Colossians got me thinking about. Because, when it uses the metaphor of "getting dressed" to encourage us to assemble and put on our best character traits, so that we can go out and live a well ordered and attractive life of faith, it got me thinking back about what my clothes actually meant to me growing up.

Dressing presentably was something I didn't understand at all, when I was a boy. In the 1960's, when I was in grade school, mud was my best friend. But it was also a time when, as many of you will recall, there were occasions where people were expected to dress up. And my mother would make us shower and wrestle us into nice clothes.

I still have some old black and white's of our family taken at the photographer's studio. My sister's long hair is neatly combed, my little brother's is neatly parted and me in my crew cut, with top collar buttoned and wearing a clip on bow tie. I'm sure I couldn't wait to get back into regular clothes and go out and play in some dirt.

But as the 60's became the 70's, I discovered, to my happiness, that dressing up seemed to be becoming optional in more and more situations and wearing whatever was comfortable and whatever you pleased was becoming the new normal. As I entered my teen years, my hair grew longer and my dress got sloppier. For the most part, I did try to buy clothes that were appropriately "groovy." I had a treasured pair of yellow and blue striped bell bottoms and elevator shoes for special occasions. Quite an amusing outfit from today's point of view.

But my daily go-to was a baggy orange sweater with missing buttons that I wore through much of high school, until it disintegrated. And I recall routinely letting the sleeves on my jackets become completely frayed and darkened with motorcycle grease. For the most part, I was oblivious to the way I dressed.

My parents were moderately appalled by my appearance, but having had strict upbringings themselves, I think they too were privately relieved that dress codes were loosening up. Those were the days when my father switched from being a heavy Brylcreem user with slicked back hair, to Vitalis, and then to a natural look and a bolo tie, which is very telling about the changes he went through.

A Change of Heart

But now that we live in a time when you can, for the most part, wear what you want when you want, I do think something is being lost that was important to people in those days. And that is the sense of moral purpose that went along with dressing up.

One of the reasons people dressed up in those days, was because it was a sign both of self-respect and respect for others. Paying attention to the details of how you dressed was a way of demonstrating that you were someone who was responsible and reliable and showed attention to detail.

So when Mom and Dad went to the studio to get pictures taken with their three carefully dressed children, they were also making a

statement about what kind of family we were, and about how seriously they took the responsibility of raising their children to be good citizens.

So, even though, in some ways I'm grateful for the changes that loosened things up, in other ways, I'm sorry that we have lost the discipline and moral reasoning and teaching moment for children that used go along with dressing up.

The thing I like about the reading from Colossians is that it takes me back with fondness to that experience of the little boy all cleaned up and smarting behind my bowtie, who was being taught that dressing presentably was not just a preference in our family, but a way of instilling respect and showing a kind of moral support for the community. He didn't like it then. But he likes it now.

A Disclaimer

I don't want to sound judgy or put dressing up as a burden on anyone else. Unless you come to church dressed in flip flops and pajamas, it's none of my business. But getting dressed for church and wearing a tie on Sunday is really important to me personally; for my own sense of who I am, what I believe and how I choose to behave. And so, the way Colossians uses the metaphor of "getting dressed" as a way to talk about living a disciplined life of faith speaks powerfully to me

And what is wonderful about this passage is that it makes clear that how we dress is not really about the clothes. It is an expression of what we believe and what we want to project out into the world. You may be wearing a suit or just a tidy pair of Salvation Army jeans. What is most important is the character traits you are clothing yourself with while you dress for the day.

As the reading says:

“holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Then let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...”

It would be a great little piece of scripture to tape to the mirror as a reminder when we get up and are getting dressed for the day. So that, when we put on pants or dress, shirt, belt, socks and shoes, we are at the same time equipping ourselves morally for the kind of work we plan to do during the day.

And that little piece of scripture goes a step farther to imply that when these moral qualities that make up our spiritual wardrobe are drawn together into a harmonious expression of love, they are as pleasing and inspiring to the hearts of others as a creative and well matching outfit is pleasing to their eyes.

Nobody has the eye to dress quite like you do. And it is also true that no-one else puts together and wears the qualities that come from your own life of faith, in quite the way you do. And when you are all dressed and you feel like everything is in the right place, isn't it true that you go out the door and into the world with a kind of peace ruling in your heart.

Grey gloomy outfits

I'll tell you another thing about my own wardrobe history. Along with the orange sweater I wore in high school, I wore all kinds of other clothes with total disregard for whether the colors went together or not. Basically, I wore layers to keep me warm going to school on my motorcycle. I looked like a clothing rack that had been hit by a tornado going by. And I confess that it did say a lot about my inner state of mind.

But as I grew into adulthood, I did begin to pay more attention to matching colors. But what I noticed is that I had a tendency to pick subdued and more muted colors; colors that seemed tasteful and that would not stand out. I noticed that this was also true of all my cars. I guess that I did this partly because I didn't want to draw attention to myself or give the impression of being in any way eccentric.

Actually I'm by nature somewhat cautious and shy. And I realize that because of this, the color schemes in my closet trend toward the gloomy and boring side, unless I intentionally make a point of adding color.

Which brings us to the Gospel reading, and its bold pronouncement that,

No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light.

Truly, I find these words both inspiring and intimidating. As far as how I dress goes, I find them intimidating because I lean toward dressing in a way that will not draw attention. And the Gospel reading seems to be directing me to put on something eye catching and maybe even a little bit zany, something that will draw attention in an attractive way to the feelings I want to project today.

And yet the words are inspiring, for the very same reason. Because there is great pleasure for everyone in the glimpses we get of God's love at work in our lives. They are so sublime, so right, and so eye-catching, coming to us in such wonderful and rich combinations, not only in the deeds people do, but in the ways God's people present

themselves, visually. Who would want to hide that experience, by dressing in nothing but dull greys.

We know what a powerful and life-giving thing God does when God touches us and the life of our church with the Spirit of Jesus. And we know that the light we share was not given to us to hide under a bushel or a bowl. These gifts of the Holy Spirit were given to us to share.

And who can deny that there are people in our communities today, who are wandering in a mist of dull greys when they look upon the world, isolating themselves out of the conviction that life in this world is nothing but a disappointment.

And perhaps our churches sometimes fall into the habit of dressing themselves a bit like I tend to do, when I forget to add color. We overemphasize dressing humbly, and in an understated subdued way, that will not draw attention, while in our hearts it is a completely different story.

We know what is like to be touched by that love which passes all understanding, and we know that the world is anything but dull and grey. We know how precious life is and how the language of faith

allows us to see into that beauty in ways that ordinary words don't. And we rejoice in it. And yet we hide the light under a bushel.

Next Saturday is Fete Noel. It will be a flurry of clothing, crafts, snacks and raffle tickets in many radiant colors. And one of the most important things about that day may be what happens before the event begins because, as the sun rises we will each be getting dressed to meet the day. Not just putting on outer clothing, but dressing in a way that reflects the way our hearts feel about what the day should be.

We will be dressing to express compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love; over coffee, over craft tables and clothing racks, knowing that we will have cause for great joy if only one lost soul glimpses the light of God in the colorful array and is brought back from a fog of grey and into God's embrace.